

Merrill's English Texts

THE VICAR OF WAKEFIELD

BY

OLIVER GOLDSMITH

WITH AN INTRODUCTION AND NOTES BY
EDNA H. L. TURPIN, EDITOR OF THE
SIR ROGER DE COVERLEY PAPERS IN
THE SPECTATOR, EMERSON'S ESSAYS,
AND THE DESERTED VILLAGE



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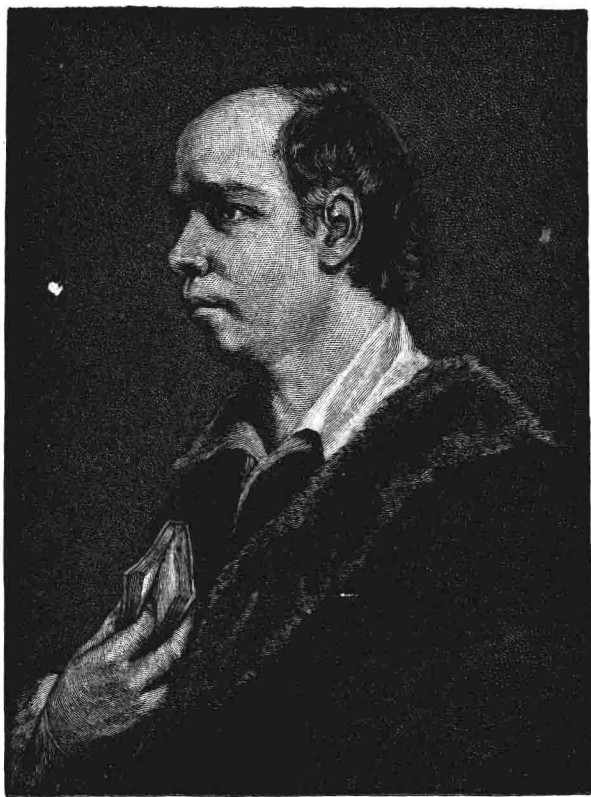
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Oliver Goldsmith

THIS EDITION
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M. VON V.
THE VICAR'S FRIEND
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ADVERTISEMENT

THERE are an hundred faults in this thing, and an hundred things might be said to prove them beauties. But it is needless. A book may be amusing with numerous errors, or it may be very dull without a single absurdity. The hero of this piece unites in himself the three greatest characters upon earth: he is a priest, an husbandman, and the father of a family. He is drawn as ready to teach, and ready to obey: as simple in affluence, and majestic in adversity. In this age of opulence and refinement, whom can such a character please? Such as are fond of high life, will turn with disdain from the simplicity of his country fireside; such as mistake ribaldry for humour, will find no wit in his harmless conversation; and such as have been taught to deride religion, will laugh at one, whose chief stores of comfort are drawn from futurity.

●OLIVER GOLDSMITH.

INTRODUCTION

OLIVER GOLDSMITH

NOT the least charm of Goldsmith's books is the intimate relation into which they bring us with one of the most "kind, artless, good humored, excursive, sensible, whimsical, intelligent beings" in the world of letters. His character is reflected in his writings, as in a mirror; and the events of his life are repeated in the incidents of his tales and poems and in the plots of his comedies. Others might have made a tragedy of life with such privations, such struggles, such pathos, such bitterness even; but our gentle humorist turned it into comedy.

Oliver Goldsmith came of a family "all equally generous, credulous, simple." His father, Reverend Charles Goldsmith, was an Irish curate, the original of the preacher of *The Deserted Village*, and Dr. Primrose of *The Vicar of Wakefield*. The pious, unworldly scholar gave his five sons and three daughters characteristic training. His son, as "the Man in Black," tells us he "took as much care to form our morals as to improve our understanding; . . . he wound us up to be mere machines of pity, and rendered us incapable of withstanding the slightest impulse made either by real or fictitious distress. In a word, we were perfectly instructed in the art of giving away thousands before we were taught the necessary qualification of getting a farthing."

Oliver, the second son, was born the tenth of November, 1728, in the Irish village of Pallas, where Charles Gold-

smith was then a curate, "passing rich with forty pounds a year." The family fortunes improved, and when Oliver was two years old his father moved to the village of Lissoy. At Lissoy, said to be the original of Auburn in *The Deserted Village*, Oliver's childhood was spent.

At the age of three he was sent to a dame-school to be taught his letters and kept out of harm's way. Neither task was easy. From the first he showed a taste for mischief and a distaste for study, which brought from his mistress the verdict that "a dull boy he was." At six he was put under the tuition — "under the ferule" according to the suggestive phrase of the day — of the village schoolmaster. Here, also, he showed himself "a stupid heavy blockhead, little better than a fool." Oliver learned more from his schoolmaster's character and experience than from his books. Thomas, or Paddy, Byrne was an old soldier, a traveler, a poet or rhymester, learned in the lore of ghosts and fairies, voluble about war and adventure. His tales found an eager listener in Oliver, and this schoolmaster was one of the guiding influences of the boy's young imagination. Like his master, he began to write verse, and these stray rhymes were received by his mother as proof that he was not the stupid fellow he was so often called. His father intended him for a trade, but maternal urgency prevailed, and it was resolved to send him to college.

Oliver's preparatory schooling was interrupted by a violent attack of smallpox, which left its marks for life upon his face and upon his character. That ugly, scarred face, that thickset, awkward figure, was a trying mask for the gentle, sensitive nature — a mask against which it often and vainly rebelled. Oliver's earliest witticisms of which we have account were retorts to comments on his personal appearance. An uncle, said to lack integrity as well as

tact, eyed him closely on their first meeting after his illness.

"Why, Noll," he exclaimed, "you are become a fright! When do you mean to get handsome again?"

The boy blushed and shuffled in silent confusion, and the question was repeated. Then he answered with a meaning flash of the eye, "I mean to get better, sir, when you do."

From Paddy Byrne's tuition, Oliver passed to other schools, — Elphinstone, Athlone, and Edgeworthstown. An incident of a journey between Edgeworthstown and his home at Lissoy, twenty miles away, deserves to be chronicled. Goldsmith, then a lad of fifteen, was making the journey on horseback, jubilant in possession of unaccustomed wealth, — a guinea presented by a friend. The money burned in his pocket, — for with him to have was ever to spend. He resolved, instead of making the journey in a day, to stay overnight at an inn. Meeting a man on the road, he asked "what was the best house of the neighborhood," meaning house of public entertainment. The man, a wag, who was amused by the youth's self-consequence, gravely directed him to what was indeed the "best house" — the private mansion of the squire. Oliver here played the man, ordered a good supper and a hot cake for breakfast, and insisted on treating his supposed landlord and his family. The squire was himself a man of humor, and, moreover, he learned that the lad was the son of his old acquaintance, Reverend Charles Goldsmith. He carried on the joke, and it was not until he wished to settle his bill next morning that Oliver learned to his embarrassment that he had been entertained at a private house. This incident, like many other events of his life, was turned to literary account; it was the groundwork of his successful comedy, *She Stoops to Conquer*; or, *The Mistakes of a Night*.

Reverend Charles Goldsmith's income was so taxed with heavy family expenses that he was unable to support his son at college. Oliver entered Trinity College, Dublin, in 1745, as a "sizar," or charity scholar. Instead of paying money for board and lodging — if so we may term left-over food and a garret room — he performed certain menial offices, such as sweeping the college courts, and carrying food from the kitchen to the dining hall. A sizar's dress — a coarse black gown and a flat cap — was a badge of his office, his inferior position, — a galling one, we well may imagine, to the shy youth with his "exquisite sensibility of contempt." Goldsmith was unhappy, too, in being consigned to the care of a tutor of uncongenial temper and tastes. Wilder was an impatient, overbearing man of violent temper, interested in mathematics and logic. Goldsmith was indolent if not stupid, averse to mathematics, fond of languages and letters.

His father was so little able to aid him financially, that he was almost entirely dependent on his good uncle Con-tarine, a country curate of unlimited generosity but limited means. When Oliver's purse was empty, — a frequent case with the poor and improvident youth, — he would sometimes earn a few shillings by writing a song or ballad for a Dublin printer. Not the least of his reward was the delight as he loitered about the streets at night, of hearing his verses from the lips of street singers. Often, before he returned to his college garret, he had spent or given away the last penny of his little earnings. On one evening's stroll a poor woman appealed to him for food and shelter for her five little ones. Goldsmith had no money, but what he had he gave, — the coat from his back, the blankets from his bed, and he in turn had to be succored by his college mates next day.

The great statesman, Edmund Burke, was one of Oliver

Goldsmith's college mates at Dublin. But they moved in different circles in their little world, and did not become acquaintances and friends until they met in the literary world of London.

Reverend Charles Goldsmith died in 1747, leaving his widow a bare support, and Oliver's only resource was the bounty of his uncle Contarine. He finished his college course, however, and, at the foot of his class, left Dublin in February, 1749, a Bachelor of Arts.

He left college, but he had no longer a home to which to turn. The Lissoy cottage, dear to his childhood and youth, had passed from the family at his father's death. His mother, straitened in means, had retired with her daughters to a little cottage at Ballymahon. His uncle Contarine and his brother Henry were both curates with small incomes and families of their own. But their hearts and houses were open to the idle, lovable fellow whose college career must have been a great disappointment to them all. They urged upon him now the necessity of choosing a profession and of preparing himself for it.

Rather in accordance with the wishes of his family than with his own inclination, it was decided that Oliver should follow the example of his father and brother and become a clergyman. As he whimsically said, he had no fancy for the somber color of a clergyman's clothes, — and, as he said about reading prayers in later years, he “did not think himself good enough.” Still he accepted this choice of a profession. On account of his youth, it was necessary to defer for two years his entrance into the sacred office. Instead of spending this time in preparatory studies, Goldsmith amused himself visiting relatives and friends, fishing, hunting, frolicking at inns, reading nothing graver than volumes of travels, poems, novels, and plays. It is small wonder that when he presented himself before the

bishop he was rejected. The immediate cause of rejection is a matter of no moment — whether, as some assert, he appeared in “flaming scarlet breeches,” whether there were unsatisfactory reports from his old tutor, or whether he was found wanting in the required preparatory studies. He was unfit for the office; the bishop recognized his unfitness.

On his friends again devolved the task of finding him a vocation, and his uncle Contarine secured him a place as tutor in a gentleman’s family. Its duties proved uncongenial. Goldsmith soon quarreled with his employer and left him, but carried away, as his salary, the unheard-of wealth of thirty pounds. For six weeks he disappeared from the view of his friends; then he reappeared — without the thirty pounds. That had gone at cards and merry-making. His relatives were naturally angry and indignant at his conduct, but a peace was patched up, and again the family conclave assembled to choose him a profession. This time law was decided upon, and patient uncle Contarine furnished funds for him to go to London to pursue legal studies. Oliver bade his friends farewell and went — as far as Dublin, where his pockets were emptied by sharpers. Again he returned home, again he was forgiven, again a profession was chosen for him. In the autumn of 1752 he left Ireland to study medicine in Edinburgh. His light heart would have grown heavy could he have known that he had looked his last upon his mother, his brother Henry, his good uncle Contarine, upon “sweet Lissoy” and the scenes dear to his childhood. Often and lovingly in days to come his heart was to turn toward Ireland, but never his vagrant footsteps.

Oliver’s first experience in Edinburgh was thoroughly characteristic. He engaged lodgings, then sallied forth to see the sights of the city. Not until he wished to

return to his room did he realize that he had neglected to learn the name of his landlady or the street and number of her house. By a fortunate chance he came upon the porter who had carried his luggage and was rescued from this predicament.

We know nothing of Goldsmith's life in Edinburgh except from one or two pleasant letters to friends and from some tailor's bill for "silver Hatt-Lace," "Sky-Blew Sattin," and "Claret-coloured Cloth," finery dear to his heart. We have no reason to suppose that in Edinburgh he devoted himself more assiduously to study than in Dublin. He gave at least nominal attention to his class work, and in the course of time announced his wish to go abroad to pursue the study of medicine in France and Holland. His uncle Contarine granted the desired permission and the needed pecuniary aid. In the spring of 1754, Goldsmith went to Leyden, where he remained about a year, attending some lectures on chemistry and anatomy. His small store of money was soon exhausted, and he resorted to various shifts to earn a living, — among others, to teaching the English language to Dutchmen, — not directly, for he knew no Dutch, but by means of his smattering of French.

After a few months in Leyden, a generous Irish friend furnished him money to go to Paris to pursue his medical studies. On the eve of leaving Leyden he strolled into a florist's garden; the gorgeous array of tulips reminded him of his uncle Contarine's fondness for that flower, then fashionable and costly in the extreme. His purse was out in an instant, and the money borrowed for his journey was spent in rare bulbs for his uncle. He left Leyden on foot, "with only one clean shirt and no money in his pocket." In the adventures of George Primrose in *The Vicar of Wakefield*, Goldsmith gives, in the main, an ac-

count of his wanderings in Europe. On foot he traveled through Germany, France, Switzerland, Italy, — now sleeping in a barn, now sheltered in a peasant's cottage, paying for a dinner with a song, a supper with a tune on his flute, a lodging with an harangue on philosophy. For a while he was tutor to a miserly young Englishman, who could have taught him financial wisdom had it been in his power to learn.

In Italy tidings came to him of the severe illness of his good uncle Contarine. We have a personal sense of regret that the kind uncle's sacrifices and loyal faith were not rewarded by the sight of the success and fame of his nephew, that he died while Oliver was little better than an unknown vagabond. There is some comfort in the fact that he did not lack testimonials of his nephew's affection, such as the tulip bulbs for which Oliver went footsore.

Perhaps this tidings determined Goldsmith's return to England. He set his face homeward, "walking from city to city, examining mankind more nearly and seeing both sides of the picture." In February, 1756, he landed in Dover, with an empty purse and with a degree in medicine, where and how acquired we do not know. What treasures of thought and experience he had gained, of which later, in inimitable essay, poem, play, and story, he was to make us the heir!

Probably in 1756 Goldsmith looked on himself as did his friends, in a far different light from that in which he appears to us to-day. His father, mother, brother, uncle, and friends had struggled to educate and maintain him. His school and college life had been discreditable; he had attempted each one of the learned professions in turn, and in turn had failed in each. He was now coming back from a gypsy-like tramp, a journey such as a peddler might have taken. At twenty-eight, then, he was a failure,

having "nothing but his brogue and his blunders," — for one did not count his ability to write a charming letter, or his possession of that wonderful treasure, a literary style.

How Goldsmith earned his livelihood during his first months in England, we do not know. We have some reason to think that he took trifling parts in comedies and acted as usher in a school.

"You may easily imagine," he wrote later in a letter, "what difficulties I had to encounter, left as I was without friends, recommendations, money, or impudence."

He drifted to London, and there, after serving for a while as an apothecary's assistant, he began to practice medicine. His patients were few and humble, his rewards small, but he tried to put the best foot foremost with his friends, and informed them that "he was practicing physic and doing very well." One of his biographers gives a humorous incident of these days. Goldsmith had somehow managed to procure the black coat which, with a wig and a cane, was the professional attire of a physician. "The coat was a second-hand one of rusty velvet, with a patch on the left breast which he adroitly covered with his three-cornered hat during his medical visits; and we have an amusing anecdote of his contest of courtesy with a patient who persisted in endeavoring to relieve him from the hat, which only made him press it more devoutly to his heart."

His success and rewards in the medical world were so small that he accepted the offer of a friend to take temporary charge of a school. Here he met Mr. Griffiths, a bookseller, who had established a periodical called *The Monthly Review*. Goldsmith's remarks on literary subjects showed taste and ability, and led Griffiths to offer him an humble position on the *Review*. He gave up his school work, and eked out existence by translations, reviews, criticisms,

and miscellaneous contributions to periodicals. After a few months of this life, he was glad to leave his attic and return to the school of his friend, Dr. Milner. Through Dr. Milner's influence he hoped to secure a medical appointment in India. To defray the necessary expenses, Goldsmith — working now, as always, under the spur of necessity — wrote a clever but rather presumptuous treatise, *Enquiry into the Present State of Polite Learning in Europe*.

Goldsmith was actually *appointed physician and surgeon to a factory in Coromandel and — there the matter ended. The position was transferred to another person, whether on account of Goldsmith's inefficiency or on account of his lack of influence we can only conjecture. That it was not because he had given up the plan of a medical career, is certain. A short time after this he presented himself at Surgeon's Hall to be examined for the office of hospital mate. The college book for December 21, 1758, bears a record which may throw light on the Coromandel affair: "James Bernard, mate to an hospital. Oliver Goldsmith found not qualified for ditto."

Thus necessity more than inclination turned Goldsmith to literature as a profession. He had to rely for a support on hack work — reviews, criticisms, and memoirs.

His *Enquiry*, published in 1759, had attracted some attention, from authors and booksellers especially, and led to his being asked to contribute to several periodicals. For one of these he wrote his *Chinese Letters*, afterwards remodeled and published under the title of *The Citizen of the World*. In a series of charming papers, somewhat on the order of those contributed by Addison to *The Spectator*, Goldsmith purported to give the experiences and reflections of a Chinese scholar on a visit to London. "Few works exhibit a nicer perception, a more delicate

delineation of life and manners. Wit, humor, and sentiment pervade every page; the vices and follies of the day are touched with the most perfect and diverting satire; and English characteristics in endless variety are hit off with the pencil of a master." Had the hack of Green Arbor Court written nothing else, these *Letters* would have given him a worthy and enduring place in English literature.

The success of the *Letters* enabled Goldsmith to leave his attic in Green Arbor Court — furnished with "a mean bed and a single wooden chair" — for better quarters in Wine Office Court. Here, in May, 1761, began his acquaintance with Dr. Johnson. Johnson had come to London years before, as poor as Goldsmith, and hampered, moreover, by physical infirmity and mental gloom. Overbearing all obstacles, he had carried out his resolution "to fight my way by my literature and my wit." His *Dictionary*, his *Rambler*, his *Rasselas*, had put him in the forefront of men of letters, and his conversational and critical powers made him the literary dictator of the day. It was arranged that Dr. Percy should call to bring him to a literary supper given by Goldsmith in his new apartments. Dr. Percy "was much struck by the studied neatness of Johnson's dress: he had on a new suit of clothes, a new wig nicely powdered, and everything about him was so dissimilar from his usual habits and appearance that his companion could not help enquiring the cause of this singular transformation. 'Why, sir,' said Johnson, 'I hear that Goldsmith, who is a very great sloven, justifies his disregard of cleanliness and decency by quoting my practice, and I am desirous this night to show him a better example.'"

The acquaintance begun that night ripened into intimacy and warm friendship. Johnson gave Goldsmith much good advice — which was generally disregarded — and substantial aid. Up those stairs in Wine Office