St. Martin's Classics

THE VICAR OF WAKEFIELD

BY

OLIVER GOLDSMITH

With an Introduction and Notes by

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THE VICAR OF WAKEFIELD

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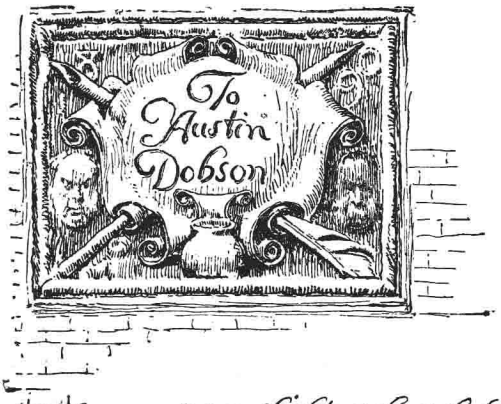
of this book.

When lovely woman stoops to folly,
And finds too late that men betray,
What charm can soothe her melancholy?
What art can wash her guilt away?



as a slight acknowledgment of
many kindnesses
these Illustrations
are
Cordially inscribed

Hugh Thomson

INTRODUCTION

THOUGH there is still some dispute about the exact place of his birth, it is now pretty well established that Oliver Goldsmith was born in the autumn of 1728 at Smith Hill near Elphin in county Roscommon. His father, the Rev. Charles Goldsmith, was a Protestant clergyman of English descent who at the time of Oliver's birth was curate of Forgney. He lived in a little cottage at Pallas near Ballymahon and supplemented the £40 a year, which seems to have been the usual salary paid in small country charges, by farming some fields near at hand. A couple of years later he became rector of Kilkenny West and moved to a good house and farm near the village of Lissoy in Westmeath. His income rose to nearly £200 a year, a sum worth three or four times that amount today. How comfortably the family lived at Lissoy can be learned in the opening chapters of *The Vicar of Wakefield.*

Here Oliver spent his boyhood. There is no doubt that this place is the original of his "sweet Auburn", however much the real Irish village may have differed from the vision of it that Goldsmith saw through the mist of years when he wrote his famous poem, *The Deserted Village.* He was sent to the village school and to various boarding-schools in the neighbourhood, whose masters agreed in declaring him a hopeless dunce.

At the age of eighteen he went to Dublin, passed the entrance examination at the foot of the list, and entered Trinity College as a sizar, that is, a student who paid for

his tuition by a certain amount of work, usually that of waiting on table in the big dining-hall or commons. He was very poor, and he was constantly getting into trouble with his tutor. He added to his scanty stock of money by writing street ballads, which he sold for 5 shillings apiece to a bookseller. Not many college students, I imagine, have had the thrill of hearing their own poems sung for pennies on the street corners. During Oliver's course at Trinity his father died, but the boy was kept on at college by his uncle, the Rev. Mr. Contarine, who always had a soft spot in his heart for the ne'er-do-well of the family. In 1749 he passed the examinations, again at the foot of the list, and became a B.A. of Trinity at the age of twenty-one.

After a good deal of idleness at home he tried teaching and made a failure of it, tried to enter the church and was refused as a candidate for the ministry, set out to study law but at Dublin gambled away the £50 his uncle Contarine had provided, and came back once more to the pleasant evenings at the village inn. His mother, who was now living at Ballymahon, did not receive him very cordially, but the good-natured uncle Contarine provided the funds once more, and Oliver left Ireland in 1752 to study medicine at Edinburgh. He never saw his native land again, though over and over in his letters to his brother he speaks of his affection for the old home.

After eighteen months at Edinburgh, where he seems to have made a reputation as a singer and story-teller, he wrote to his uncle about the greater advantages for a medical student of the universities on the Continent, especially of Leyden in Holland. Money was forthcoming, and Oliver went to Leyden in 1754. Very little is known of his doings for the next two years, as he left

no account of them himself and such of his letters as survive from those written home during the time give only vague hints. The one thing that seems clear is that he wandered over a good deal of Europe. He claimed to have got a medical degree from a Continental university, probably Louvain or Padua, but was never very precise in his statements about it. His friends in London years afterwards were rather dubious about this degree, and enjoyed chaffing the "Doctor" about it, as any one can see who cares to read Garrick's prologue to *She Stoops to Conquer.*

At any rate, he came back to London in 1756 without a shilling and tried to set up as a doctor. He found no patients and had to resort to all sorts of shifts to make a living. He was by turns usher in a school, assistant to an apothecary, and hack-writer for a publisher named Griffiths. He applied for a medical appointment on the Coromandel Coast, that is, the east coast of India, and actually got the appointment, but for some reason that he never chose to explain the project fell through. Immediately after this failure he applied at Surgeon's Hall to be examined for a post as Surgeon's Mate, but was declared "not qualified". It is likely that his rejection was due to want of indentures as an apprentice to a surgeon rather than to want of knowledge. He went back to his work as a literary hack.

His career as an author really begins with his *Enquiry into the Present State of Polite Learning in Europe.* It was published anonymously, but was pretty generally known to be by Goldsmith. It provoked a good deal of counter-criticism, and so brought its author into a certain prominence. He was invited by a bookseller named Wilkie to become sole contributor to a small weekly

magazine on the general lines of Addison's *Spectator.* The first number of *The Bee* appeared on October 6th, 1759, but the little magazine never got to be popular and was soon stopped.

A series of letters written to the *Public Ledger* in 1760-61, ostensibly by a Chinese gentleman who had come west to study European civilization, were later collected and published under the title of *Citizen of the World.* These letters seem to have been the first thing that attracted Johnson's attention to Goldsmith, a fact that of itself would make them important in his life. But it is also clear that if Goldsmith had been less of a spendthrift he was now making enough money to maintain himself comfortably. But money always slipped through his fingers and left those to whom it was really due, the tailor and landlady and victualler, to envy the better luck of every beggar or chance acquaintance who was able by a hard-luck story to prey on Goldsmith's credulity and softness of heart.

Samuel Johnson was another who, though no prodigal, gave his sympathy and protection to any one that was poor and honest and in straitened circumstances. Luckily for the careless Irishman, Johnson befriended him. And so we find that in 1764, when Reynolds organized The Literary Club, or The Club, as its members always called it, Goldsmith was one of the original members along with such celebrities as Burke and Johnson himself. It is clear, however, that he must have been a writer of considerable reputation even at that time.

His reputation was soon enormously enhanced by the publication of *The Traveller,* of which Johnson declared to Boswell, "There has not been so fine a poem since Pope's time." Two years later, in 1766, *The Vicar*

of Wakefield was published. The manuscript had been disposed of before *The Traveller* was sold, but the bookseller evidently had doubts about its success, and kept it by him till the reputation of *The Traveller* made it certain that a novel by the same author would be sure to sell.

From this time forward Goldsmith had plenty of reasonably well-paid work to do. It is true that he got deeper and deeper into debt, but he did so through his improvidence and prodigality, not through lack of a good income. His services were in demand by the booksellers, for whom he did a great deal of very skilful hack-work, chiefly in abridging longer books or compiling popular histories.

At the end of February, 1768, his first play, *The Good-natured Man,* was finally produced after long delays at the recently opened Covent Garden theatre. On the whole the comedy was a success despite severe criticism of the bailiff scene, which was regarded as "low". Authors were usually paid by getting the proceeds from three evenings of a play's run. Goldsmith's three nights netted him £400 and the printing of the play brought £100 more.

He now undertook a *History of Animated Nature* to come out in eight volumes and to bring him £800 for the copyright. It is almost certain that he had received the full sum in advance before the book was published in 1774. He brought out a *History of Rome* which was so well received that he was induced to undertake "An History of England, from the Birth of the British Empire to the death of George the Second" for which he was to be paid £500. It was printed in 1771. Both of these histories belong to what is known as hack-work. Their

one claim to merit is the easy natural style that makes them so readable.

Goldsmith's real interest at this time led him to put all his spare time into the composition of *The Deserted Village* which more than anything else he ever wrote seems to have been a labour of love. It is not known how much he got for the poem but it was a great and immediate success so that on the death of Gray in 1771, the year after it was published, Goldsmith was everywhere recognized as the greatest of living poets.

Apparently the £500 he had got for *The Good-natured Man* convinced him that play-writing was the best paid branch of the author's profession. A misadventure of his own as a schoolboy of sixteen provided the setting for his new play, *She Stoops to Conquer* or *The Mistakes of a Night,* to give its sub-title. This is not the place to dwell on the importance of this comedy in the history of English drama. It is enough to say that it brought back genuine humour to the English stage. It is still, after a century and a half, one of the most popular plays in the language.

Little further need be told about Goldsmith's life. He got more and more involved in debt and his health, which for some years had not been good, began to fail. His last poem *Retaliation,* one of the most brilliant and humorous character sketches in the language, was not published till after his death. It is a series of epitaphs on his fellows of The Club remarkable for its good humour, its good taste, and its shrewd and kindly characterization. The unfinished epitaph of Reynolds for whom Goldsmith had a special affection is said to have been written just before he took to his bed on the evening of March 25th. He sank gradually but rapidly for the next ten days and died

on the 4th of April, 1774. He was buried privately in the ground of the Temple Church. Two years later Johnson wrote the well known Latin epitaph for his monument which was put in Westminster Abbey. One clause in it is as famous as it is just: "Nullum quod tetigit non ornavit"—There was nothing he touched that he did not adorn.

There has been a tendency among writers on English literature to treat Goldsmith with a certain condescension as if he were a naughty child who never grew up. Horace Walpole's jibe, "inspired idiot", and Garrick's quip, "who wrote like an angel but talked like poor Poll", have stuck in our minds. And then Macaulay, probably without intending it, held him up to ridicule in an article in the *Britannica.* But *The Deserted Village, The Vicar of Wakefield,* and *She Stoops to Conquer* sweep such thoughts away. Goldsmith with his soft heart and his joyous humour, with the mellow wisdom of life to be found everywhere in his essays, and above all with his marvellous English prose that flows along as musical and limpid as a brook from a bubbling spring deserves the tribute paid him by his friend Dr. Johnson: "He had raised money and squandered it, by every artifice of acquisition and folly of expense. But let not his frailties be remembered: He was a very great man."

The story of how Samuel Johnson came to dispose of the manuscript of *The Vicar of Wakefield* for Goldsmith has been often told. Johnson's own account is that he received a message one morning from Goldsmith saying that he was in great distress and begging Johnson to come to him. Johnson sent him a guinea and promised to come at once. He went as soon as he was dressed and

found that Goldsmith's landlady had arrested him for his rent. Goldsmith was in a violent passion but had changed the guinea and had got a bottle of madeira and a glass before him. Johnson corked the bottle, asked Goldsmith to calm himself, and began to talk to him of ways and means of meeting the debt. Goldsmith produced the manuscript of a novel which Johnson glanced through. He saw its merit, took it with him to a bookseller, and returned with £60. Goldsmith paid his arrears of rent "not without rating his landlady," says Johnson, "in a high tone for having used him so ill."

This happened in 1764, but the bookseller did not publish the book for two years. The success of Goldsmith's long narrative poem *The Traveller* made it reasonably sure that *The Vicar of Wakefield* would be well received. It made no stir, however, in literary circles and was not even reviewed by most of the better newspapers and monthly reviews. Yet a second edition was needed by the end of May and a third was printed on the 25th of August. Seven editions came out within eight years after it first appeared and it was early translated into several European languages. Evidently it appealed to a wide public and grew steadily in reputation until at last it was firmly established as a great novel.

The Vicar of Wakefield is one of the classics of English literature. Its theme is substantially the same as that of the Book of Job, the patience of a good man under a series of unmerited afflictions. But it is the charm of its style, the grace, the tenderness, the humour, the knowledge it shows of human weaknesses and foibles, that lure one back year after year to read *The Vicar* again when one is bored by the latest "book of the month". As Sir Walter Scott has said, "We bless the memory of an

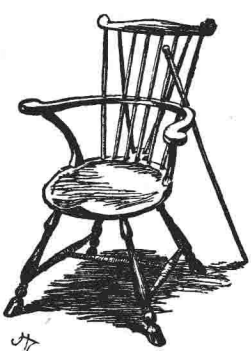
author who contrives so well to reconcile us to human nature." Obviously Sir Walter felt the essential reality of the book in spite of all its improbable incidents. I suppose the sense of reality we still feel in so much of *The Vicar* is largely due to the fact that it is based on Goldsmith's own experience. It is no Vicar of an English Wakefield that sat for the portrait of Dr. Primrose but Oliver's own father, whose lack of worldly wisdom makes him at once so lovable and so unreliable a guide for that family "all equally generous, credulous, simple, and inoffensive". Oliver seems to feel that his home training had not prepared him for the rough scramble in that 18th century world where it was so easy to slip into follies and so hard to avoid the wiles of sharpers. But there is no trace of bitterness in the picture he draws. We smile at the good man's pride in his volumes on the Whistonian controversy, and the smile passes over into a ripple of laughter as we see him in that amusing family portrait presenting the volumes to his wife in the guise of Venus with diamonds painted plentifully in her stomacher and hair. No other goddess is so much in need as Venus of arguments that stress the iniquity of second marriages. We smile again, but through a mist in our eyes and with a lump in our throats, at the good man preaching in the jail to that amused and mischievous audience whom in less than a fortnight he managed to convert into "something social and humane". In all that has been written since Goldsmith's time on the great subject of prison reform it would be hard to find anything wiser or more humane than one can read in Chapter XXVII of *The Vicar of Wakefield.*

The story of Mr. Burchell, too, who had squandered his money in youth on faithless friends is a reminder of

the improvident Goldsmith with his train of pensioners and his soft heart which left him so easy a prey to any rascal with a tale of hard luck. And the account George gives of his wanderings through Europe is, of course, based on those years that Oliver spent on the continent, paying for food and a night's lodging with a tune on his flute. Above all Oliver Goldsmith is Moses, through whose person he recalls his own boyhood as the dunce of the family. That picture of the sisters getting Moses ready for the fair must be drawn from memory of some such preparation. The account, too, of how Squire Thornhill turned the laugh against him by rattling off a few phrases of what Carlyle would call chop-logic, so that poor Moses was the only dismal figure in the merry group, takes on a poignant reality when we remember how often Boswell tells about the discomfiture of Oliver Goldsmith in that brilliant and somewhat cruel circle of Dr. Johnson's intimate acquaintances.

It is, of course, easy to pick faults in *The Vicar of Wakefield*. Goldsmith has himself given the proper answer to fault-finders in his advertisement or preface which the reader may turn to at this point. There he will find that Goldsmith realized all the objections that can so easily be raised and was quietly indifferent to them. He knew he had written a great book in this first simple domestic novel. It has delighted and instructed all manner of folk for many generations. So great a man as Goethe says that reading *The Vicar of Wakefield* was what formed his character. And the list of those who have vied with one another in praising *The Vicar* would include most of the famous names in literature from Goethe to George Saintsbury, who in his *History of English Prose* gives up the attempt to analyze the style of the

opening chapters and falls back on the adjective "delicious". Where my betters have failed to satisfy themselves in praising, who am I to attempt again the impossible task? I never read the opening paragraphs of *The Vicar* without a sinking of the heart for I know I shall never be able to write like that. And yet to write like that will remain my ambition. For nowhere else is there the same simplicity and truth, and the same sense of effortless ease in the flow of that "delicious" prose. Among one's annual New Year's resolves should be that of reading again this year *The Vicar of Wakefield*. It will be no penance but sheer delight. Yet nothing can serve one better as a kind of touchstone of taste than a constantly freshened remembrance of this great and most delightful of English novels.



Goldsmith's Chair and Cane.

South Kensington Museum.