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With a Life of Goldsmith by
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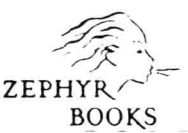

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THE VICAR OF WAKEFIELD

OLIVER GOLDSMITH

by Sir Walter Scott

Oliver Goldsmith was born on the [10th] November 1728, at Pallas (or rather Palice), in the parish of Forney, and county of Longford, in Ireland, where his father, the Rev. Charles Goldsmith, a minister of the Church of England, at that time resided. This worthy clergyman, whose virtues his celebrated son afterwards rendered immortal, in the character of the Village Preacher, had a family of [eight] children, for whom he was enabled to provide but very indifferently. He obtained ultimately a benefice in the county of Roscommon, but died early; for the careful researches of the Rev. John Graham of Lifford have found his widow [growing old and] residing with her son Oliver in Ballymahon, so early as 1740. Among the shop accounts of a petty grocer of the place, Mrs. Goldsmith's name occurs frequently as a customer for trifling articles; on which occasions Master Noll appears to have been his mother's usual emissary. He was recollected, however, in the neighbourhood,

by more poetical employments, as that of playing on the flute, and wandering in solitude on the shores, or among the islands of the river Inny, which is remarkably beautiful at Ballymahon.

Oliver early distinguished himself by the display of lively talents, and of that uncertainty of humour which is so often attached to genius, as the slave in the chariot of the Roman triumph. An uncle by [marriage], the Rev. Thomas Contarine, undertook the expense of affording to so promising a youth the advantages of a scholastic education. He was put to school at Edgeworth's Town, and, in June 1744, was sent to Dublin College as a sizar; a situation which subjected him to much discouragement and ill-usage, especially as he had the misfortune to fall under the charge of a brutal tutor.

On 15th June 1747 Goldsmith obtained his only academical laurel, being an exhibition on the foundation of Erasmus Smythe, Esq. Some indiscreet frolic induced him soon afterwards to quit the university for a period; and he appears thus early to have commenced that sort of idle strolling life which has often great charms for youths of genius, because it frees them from every species of subjection, and leaves them full masters of their own time and their own thoughts, a liberty which they do not feel too dearly bought at the expense of fatigue, of hunger, and of all the other incon-

veniences incidental to those who travel without money. Those who can recollect journeys of this kind, with all the shifts, necessities, and petty adventures which attend them, will not wonder at the attractions which they had for such a youth as Goldsmith. Notwithstanding these erratic expeditions, he was admitted Bachelor of Arts in 1749.

Goldsmith's persevering friend, Mr. Contarine, seems to have recommended the direction of his nephew's studies to medicine, and, in the year 1752, he was settled at Edinburgh to pursue that science. Of his residence in Scotland Goldsmith retained no favourable recollections. He was thoughtless, and he was cheated; he was poor, and he was nearly starved. Yet, in a very lively letter from Edinburgh, addressed to Robert Bryanton of Ballymahon, he closes a sarcastic description of the country and its inhabitants, with the good-humoured candour which made so distinguished a part of his character. "An ugly and a poor man is society only for himself, and such society the world lets me enjoy in great abundance. Fortune has given you circumstances, and nature a [person] to look charming in the eyes of the fair. Nor do I envy, my dear Bob, such blessings, while I may sit down and laugh at the world, and at myself, the most ridiculous object in it."

From Edinburgh our student passed to Leyden,

but not without the diversities of an arrest for debt, a captivity of seven days at Newcastle, from having been found in company with some Scotsmen in the French service, and the no less unpleasing variety of a storm. At Leyden Goldsmith was peculiarly exposed to a temptation which he never, at any period of his life, could easily resist. The opportunities of gambling were frequent—he seldom declined them, and was at length stripped of every shilling.

In this hopeless condition Goldsmith commenced his travels, with one shirt in his pocket, and a devout reliance on Providence. It is understood that in the narrative of George, eldest son of the Vicar of Wakefield, the author gave a sketch of the resources which enabled him, on foot and without money, to make the tour of Europe. Through Germany and Flanders he had recourse to his violin, in which he was tolerably skilled; and a lively tune usually procured him a lodging in some peasant's cottage for the evening. In Italy, where his music or skill was held in less esteem, he found hospitality by disputing at the monasteries, in the character of a travelling scholar, upon certain philosophical theses, which the learned inhabitants were obliged, by their foundation, to uphold against all impugners. Thus he obtained sometimes money, sometimes lodgings. He must have

had other resources to procure both, which he has not thought proper to intimate. The foreign universities afford similar facilities to poor scholars with those presented by the monasteries. Goldsmith resided at Padua for several months, and is said to have taken a degree at Louvain. Thus far is certain, that an account of the tour made by so good a judge of human nature, in circumstances so singular, would have made one of the most entertaining books in the world; and it is both wonder and pity that Goldsmith did not hit upon a publication of his travels amongst the other literary resources in which his mind was fertile. He was not ignorant of the advantages which his mode of travelling had opened to him. "Countries," he says in his *Essay on Polite Literature in Europe*, "wear very different appearances to travellers of different circumstances. A man who is whirled through Europe in his post-chaise, and the pilgrim who walks the great tour on foot, will form very different conclusions. *Haud inexpertus loquor.*" * Perhaps he grew ashamed of the last admission, which he afterwards omitted. Goldsmith spent about [two years] in these wanderings, and landed in England in the year 1756, after having perambulated France, Italy, and part of Germany.

* I speak from experience.

Poverty was now before our author in all its bitterness. His Irish friends had long renounced or forgotten him; and the wretched post of usher to an academy, of which he has drawn so piteous a picture in George's account of himself, was his refuge from actual starving. Unquestionably, his description was founded on personal recollections, where he says: "I was up early and late; I was browbeat by the master; hated for my ugly face by the mistress; worried by the boys within; and never permitted to stir out to seek civility abroad." This state of slavery he underwent at Peckham Academy, and had such bitter recollection thereof as to be offended at the slightest allusion to it. An acquaintance happening to use the proverbial phrase, "Oh, that is all a holiday at Peckham," Goldsmith reddened, and asked if he meant to affront him. From this miserable condition he escaped, with difficulty, to that of journeyman, or rather shop-porter, to a chemist in Fish Street Hill, in whose service he was recognized by Dr. Sleigh, his countryman and fellow-student at Edinburgh, who, to his eternal honour, relieved Oliver Goldsmith from this state of slavish degradation.

Under the auspices of his friend and countryman, Goldsmith commenced practice as a physician about the Bankside, and afterwards near the Temple; and, although unsuccessful in procuring

fees, had soon plenty of patients. It was now that he first thought of having recourse to that pen which afterwards afforded the public so much delight. He wrote, he laboured, he compiled ; he is described by one contemporary as wearing a rusty, full-trimmed black suit, the very livery of the Muses, with his pockets stuffed with papers and his head with projects ; gradually he forced himself and his talents into notice, and was at last enabled to write, in one letter to a friend, that he was too poor to be gazed at, but too rich to need assistance ; and to boast in another of the refined conversation which he was sometimes admitted to partake in.

He now circulated proposals for publishing, by subscription, his *Essay on Polite Literature in Europe*, the profits of which he destined to equipping himself for India, having obtained from the Company the appointment of physician to one of their factories on the coast of Coromandel. But to rise in literature was more his desire than to increase his fortune. "I eagerly long," he said, "to embrace every opportunity to separate myself from the vulgar, as much in my circumstances as I am already in my sentiments. . . . I find I want constitution and a strong steady disposition, which alone makes men great. I will, however, correct my faults, since I am conscious of them."

Goldsmith's versatile talents and ready pen soon

engaged him in the service of the booksellers [who were also the publishers]; and, doubtless, the touches of his spirit and humour were used to enliven the dull pages of many a sorry miscellany and review; a mode of living which, joined to his own improvidence, rendered his income as fluctuating as his occupation. He wrote many essays for various periodical publications, and afterwards collected them into one volume, finding that they were unceremoniously appropriated by his contemporaries. In the preface he compares himself to the fat man in a famine, who, when his fellow-sufferers proposed to feast on the superfluous part of his person, insisted with some justice on having the first slice himself. But his most elaborate effort in this style is the *Citizen of the World*; letters supposed to be written by a Chinese philosopher, resident in England, in imitation of the *Lettres Persanes* of Montesquieu. Still, however, though subsisting thus precariously, he was getting forward in society; and had already, in the year 1761, made his way as far as Dr. Johnson, who seems, from their first acquaintance, till death separated them, to have entertained for Goldsmith the most sincere friendship, regarding his genius with respect, his failings with indulgence, and his person with affection.

It was probably soon after this first acquaintance

that necessity, the parent of so many works of genius, gave birth to *The Vicar of Wakefield.* The circumstances attending the sale of the work to the fortunate publisher [probably in 1764] are too singular to be told in any other words than those of Johnson, as reported by his faithful chronicler, Boswell.

"I received one morning a message from poor Goldsmith, that he was in great distress; and as it was not in his power to come to me, begging that I would come to him as soon as possible. I sent him a guinea, and promised to come to him directly. I accordingly went as soon as I was dressed, and found that his landlady had arrested him for his rent, at which he was in a violent passion. I perceived that he had already changed my guinea, and had got a bottle of Madeira and a glass before him. I put the cork into the bottle, desired he would be calm, and began to talk to him of the means by which he might be extricated. He then told me that he had a novel ready for the press, which he produced to me. I looked into it, and saw its merit; told the landlady I should soon return, and, having gone to a bookseller, sold it for sixty pounds. I brought Goldsmith the money, and he discharged his rent, not without rating his landlady in a high tone for having used him so ill."

Newbery, the purchaser of *The Vicar of Wakefield,*

best known to the present generation by recollection of their infantine studies [of the books for children which he wrote and published], was a man of worth as well as wealth, and the frequent patron of distressed genius. When he completed the bargain, which he probably entered into partly from compassion, partly from deference to Johnson's judgment, he had so little confidence in the value of his purchase, that *The Vicar of Wakefield* remained in manuscript until [1766, when] the publication of the *Traveller* had established the fame of the author.

For this beautiful poem Goldsmith had collected materials during his travels; and a part of it had been actually written in Switzerland, and transmitted from that country to the author's brother, the Reverend Dr. Henry Goldsmith. His distinguished friend, Dr. Johnson, aided him with several general hints; and is said to have contributed [nine lines to the poem].

The publication of the *Traveller* gave the author all that celebrity which he had so long laboured to attain. He now assumed the professional dress of the medical science, a scarlet cloak, wig, sword, and cane, and was admitted as a valued member of that distinguished society, which afterwards formed the Literary, or as it is more commonly called, emphatically, *The* CLUB. For this he made some sacrifices, renouncing some of the public places

which he had formerly found convenient in point of expense and amusement; not without regret, for he used to say, "In truth, one must make some sacrifices to obtain good society; for here am I shut out of several places where I used to play the fool very agreeably." It often happened amid those sharper wits with whom he now associated that the simplicity of his character, mingled with an inaccuracy of expression, an undistinguishing spirit of vanity, and a hurriedness of conception, which led him often into absurdity, rendered Dr. Goldsmith in some degree the butt of the company. Garrick, in particular, who probably presumed somewhat on the superiority of a theatrical manager over a dramatic author, shot at him many shafts of small epigrammatic wit. It is probable that Goldsmith began to feel that this spirit was carried too far, and to check it in the best taste, he composed his celebrated poem of *Retaliation* [1774] in which the characters and failings of his associates are drawn with satire at once pungent and good-humoured.* Garrick is smartly chastised; Burke, the dinner-bell of the House of Commons, is not spared; and of all the more distinguished names

* [It is said that the poem was begun as a reply to Garrick's epitaph:

"Here lies Nolly Goldsmith, for shortness called Noll,
Who wrote like an angel, but talked like poor Poll."]

of the Club, Johnson and Reynolds alone escape the lash of the satirist. The latter is even dismissed with unqualified and affectionate applause. *Retaliation* had the effect of placing the author on a more equal footing with his society than he had ever before assumed. Even against the despotism of Johnson, though much respecting him, and as much beloved by him, Goldsmith made a more spirited stand than was generally ventured upon by the compeers of that arbitrary Sultan of Literature. Of this Boswell has recorded a striking instance. Goldsmith had been descanting on the difficulty and importance of making animals in an apologue speak in character, and particularly instanced the fable of the Little Fishes. Observing that Dr. Johnson was laughing scornfully, he proceeded smartly: "Why, Dr. Johnson, this is not so easy as you seem to think, for if *you* were to make little fishes talk, they would talk like whales."

To support the expense of his new dignities, Goldsmith laboured incessantly at the literary oar. [*The History of England, in a series of letters*, 1764, published anonymously and] commonly ascribed to Lord Lyttelton, and containing an excellent and entertaining abridgement of the *Annals of Britain*, are the work of Goldsmith. His mode of compiling them we learn from some interesting anecdotes of the author, communicated to the *European Maga-*

zine by William Cooke, a young student who had lived near Goldsmith in the Temple].

"He first read in a morning, from [the histories of England by] Hume, Rapin, and sometimes Kennet, as much as he designed for one letter, marking down the passages referred to on a sheet of paper, with remarks. He then rode or walked out with a friend or two, whom he constantly had with him; returned to dinner, spent the day generally convivially, without much drinking (which he was never in the habit of), and when he went up to bed, took up his books and paper with him, where he generally wrote the chapter, or the best part of it, before he went to rest. The latter exercise cost him very little trouble, he said; for having all his materials ready for him, he wrote it with as much facility as a common letter.

"But of all his compilations, he used to say, his *Beauties of English Poetry Selected* showed more 'the art of profession.' Here he did nothing but mark the particular passages with a red lead pencil, and for this he got [fifty pounds]—but then he used to add, 'a man shows his judgment in these selections, and he may be often twenty years of his life cultivating that judgment.'"

Goldsmith, amid these more petty labours, aspired to the honours of the sock, and the *Good-Natured Man* was produced at Covent Garden, 29th January