

THE VICAR OF WAKEFIELD

OLIVER GOLDSMITH

Introduction by Earle Toppings



COMPLETE
AND UNABRIDGED

THE
VICAR
OF
WAKEFIELD

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OLIVER GOLDSMITH

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THE VICAR OF WAKEFIELD



OLIVER GOLDSMITH

Introduction

Oliver Goldsmith (1728-1774) attained a high rank among his contemporary writers, a surprising feat in that during much of his writing lifetime he supported himself in hack work for the booksellers. In the present novel he refers at one point to "all honest jog-trot men"—authors who, if they had been cobblers, instead, "would all their lives have only mended shoes, but never made them." It is to Goldsmith's credit that despite the vast amount of bread-and-butter work he was forced to do, he managed to write lasting works that leave the impression he composed them at his leisure to please himself. The story goes that in London Dr. Johnson prevented Goldsmith's landlady from arresting him for unpaid rent, having found the manuscript of *The Vicar of Wakefield* in the author's room and obtained £60 for it from a publisher.

Goldsmith was born in Ireland, the son of a poor Protestant clergyman. Upon graduating from Trinity College, Dublin, he considered Holy Orders, but tradition has it that he wore scarlet breeches when summoned by the examining bishop, who felt that the color hardly indicated a mind serious about religion. Goldsmith later

set out on the grand tour on foot, acquired a medical degree along the way, and served as a physician among the poor in London. With his own background in the parsonage, and this work among the indigent, he came to know the depressed classes intimately and to have deep compassion for them.

In *The Vicar* it is the middle and lower classes that receive his sympathy; he observes his fellows simply and charitably, except for the pretentious and pompous, who are deflated with splendid subtlety and good humor. The genteel gentry care to learn nothing more about life than its pleasures, its high life. Lady Blarney and Miss Carolina Wilhelmina Amelia Skeggs (like the good Vicar, I enjoy using her full name) represent "tip-top quality breeding," albeit the sort that on closer inspection seems rented. Mr. Thornhill had the stamp of quality, too, and "not withstanding his real ignorance, talked with ease." While the Vicar warms to persons with a good-natured glow, an absence of malice, and an abundance of the joy of living, the high-born classes value appearances and engage in elaborate games of one-upmanship, no doubt to relieve the monotony of their lives. The ladies mentioned, though not born very high themselves, establish the principle that the chief social art, especially if the classes are mingled, is condescension.

The Reverend Mr. Primrose is a romantic, an optimist, a man of untarnished goodwill who delights in "those harmless delusions that tend to make us more happy." Yet the author is not trying to show us a grinning old fool, a blissful innocent. The generosity of spirit, in fact, is sharply in contrast with pinched and pointed Puritanism. Mr. Primrose, like "The Village Preacher" of that poem by Goldsmith, does not wish to file and label the faults and merits of men. Life is good, to be enjoyed. Its store is not the Puritan burden of sin and guilt; one does not tremble in fear of God, but rejoices in Him and loves His world. Primrose talks homely goodness, not theology; his religion is expressed in the brotherhood of man. He is tolerant of variations in belief, and the mores on which he is adamant—such as monogamy—directly affect the

home and family. He delights in being hailed as "the great Primrose, that courageous Monogamist," that "glorious pillar of unshaken orthodoxy." Of course the author is having some fun at this point because the Vicar is rather too liberal to be wholly orthodox, and as for the running joke on monogamy, one suspects it was a topic pounded to tedium in some of the churches, perhaps in the face of a rising interest in what might be termed Tom Jonesian activities. In this book one will now and then hear a lady exclaim, "Good heaven! how very near I have been to the brink of ruin!"

That was eighteenth-century brinkmanship; yet daily life was not always so eventful. In the good preacher's words, "We had no revolutions to fear, nor fatigues to undergo; all our adventures were by the fireside and all our migrations from the blue bed to the brown." It was a charming age when a household could become famous for its gooseberry wine. And to find a maladjusted character between these covers would be a difficult task: the story is staged for compatibility and comfort. Roles of the sexes were still pleasantly differentiated, women tending to be humored and pampered more than they are today. It was not expected that a woman should be educated, so with his wife and daughters the parson engaged in "innocent mirth," but with his sons in philosophy.

Yet the setting is deceptively idyllic and entertaining. Goldsmith's work, especially his poetry, also spoke to a people losing its link with the land. An industrial age was soon to replace the pastoral one, and he knew that the simple life, close to nature, was passing. This sentimental regard for the superiority of rural virtues has lingered in North America; it is when our children depart for the city that they fall into evil ways.

In *The Vicar* we see how thin is the veneer of civilization and integrity, especially as related to the more pretentious classes. Plots and schemes abound and people of the high life are likely to have the most astounding aims and motives. There is a strong emphasis upon confession. Unmaskings leave scoundrels absolutely undone,

and innocent men plausibly vindicated. The author does not call for organized routing of bad men and thieves but, rather, impresses the reader with the efficacy of his own one-man stand against injustice and iniquity. His philosophy is that the church as an institution, for example, could not be expected to mount armies against the world's wrongdoers; it is for individual followers to take action as conscience directs.

In attempting to speak for goodness and decency, the lone campaigner cannot lose, for, as the Vicar observes, "Good counsel rejected returns to enrich the giver's bosom; and though the instruction I communicate may not mend them, yet it will assuredly mend myself." Here is a picture of the good man struggling cheerfully against adversity.

Earle Toppings

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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 fire-side. 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

Chapter 1

The Description of the Family of Wakefield, in Which a Kindred Likeness Prevails as Well of Minds as of Persons

I was ever of opinion that the honest man who married and brought up a large family did more service than he who continued single and only talked of population. From this motive, I had scarce taken orders a year before I began to think seriously of matrimony, and chose my wife as she did her wedding gown, not for a fine glossy surface, but such qualities as would wear well. To do her justice, she was a good-natured notable woman; and as for breeding, there were few country ladies who at that time could show more. She could read any English book without much spelling; and for pickling, preserving, and cookery, none could excel her. She prided herself much also upon being an excellent contriver in housekeeping; yet I could never find that we grew richer with all her contrivances.

However, we loved each other tenderly, and our fondness increased with age. There was in fact nothing that could make us angry with the world or each other. We had an elegant house, situated in a fine country and a good neighbourhood. The year was spent in moral or rural amusements, in visiting our rich neighbours, or relieving such as were poor. We had no revolutions to fear, nor fatigues to undergo; all our adventures were by the fire-side, and all our migrations from the blue bed to the brown.

As we lived near the road, we often had the traveller or stranger come to taste our gooseberry wine, for which we had great reputation; and I profess with the veracity of an historian that I never knew one of them find fault with it. Our cousins too, even to the fortieth remove, all remembered their affinity, without any help from the herald's office, and came very frequently to see us. Some of them did us no great honour by these claims of kin-

dred; for literally speaking, we had the blind, the maimed, and the halt amongst the number. However, my wife always insisted that as they were the same *flesh and blood* with us, they should sit with us at the same table. So that if we had not very rich, we generally had very happy friends about us; for this remark will hold good thro' life, that the poorer the guest, the better pleased he ever is with being treated; and as some men gaze with admiration at the colours of a tulip, and others are smitten with the wing of a butterfly, so I was by nature an admirer of happy human faces. However, when any one of our relations was found to be a person of very bad character, a troublesome guest, or one we desired to get rid of, upon his leaving my house for the first time, I ever took care to lend him a riding coat, or a pair of boots, or sometimes an horse of small value, and I always had the satisfaction of finding he never came back to return them. By this the house was cleared of such as we did not like; but never was the family of Wakefield known to turn the traveller or the poor dependant out of doors.

Thus we lived several years in a state of much happiness, not but that we sometimes had those little rubs which Providence sends to enhance the value of its other favours. My orchard was often robbed by school-boys, and my wife's custards plundered by the cats or the children. The Squire would sometimes fall asleep in the most pathetic parts of my sermon, or his lady return my wife's civilities at church with a mutilated curtsey. But we soon got over the uneasiness caused by such accidents, and usually in three or four days we began to wonder how they vexed us.

My children, the offspring of temperance, as they were educated without softness, so they were at once well formed and healthy; my sons hardy and active, my daughters dutiful and blooming. When I stood in the midst of the little circle, which promised to be the supports of my declining age, I could not avoid repeating the famous story of Count Abensberg, who, in Henry II's progress through Germany, when other courtiers came with their treasures, brought his thirty-two children and presented

them to his sovereign as the most valuable offering he had to bestow. In this manner, though I had but six, I considered them as a very valuable present made to my country, and consequently looked upon it as my debtor. Our eldest son was named George, after his uncle, who left us ten thousand pounds. Our second child, a girl, I intended to call after her aunt Grissel; but my wife, who during her pregnancy had been reading romances insisted upon her being called Olivia. In less than another year we had a daughter again, and now I was determined that Grissel should be her name; but a rich relation taking a fancy to stand godmother, the girl was, by her directions, called Sophia; so that we had two romantic names in the family; but I solemnly protest I had no hand in it. Moses was our next, and after an interval of twelve years, we had two sons more.

It would be fruitless to deny my exultation when I saw my little ones about me; but the vanity and the satisfaction of my wife were even greater than mine. When our visitors would usually say, "Well, upon my word, Mrs. Primrose, you have the finest children in the whole country."—"Ay, neighbour," she would answer, "they are as heaven made them, handsome enough, if they be good enough; for handsome is that handsome does." And then she would bid the girls hold up their heads; who, to conceal nothing, were certainly very handsome. Mere outside is so very trifling a circumstance with me that I should scarce have remembered to mention it, had it not been a general topic of conversation in the country. Olivia, now about eighteen, had that luxuriance of beauty with which painters generally draw Hebe; open, sprightly, and commanding. Sophia's features were not so striking at first, but often did more certain execution; for they were soft, modest, and alluring. The one vanquished by a single blow, the other by efforts successfully repeated.

The temper of a woman is generally formed from the turn of her features; at least it was so with my daughters. Olivia wished for many lovers, Sophia to secure one. Olivia was often affected from too great a desire to please. Sophia even repress excellence from her fears to offend.

The one entertained me with her vivacity when I was gay, the other with her sense when I was serious. But these qualities were never carried to excess in either, and I have often seen them exchange characters for a whole day together. A suit of mourning has transformed my coquette into a prude, and a new set of ribands given her younger sister more than natural vivacity. My eldest son George was bred at Oxford, as I intended him for one of the learned professions. My second boy Moses, whom I designed for business, received a sort of miscellaneous education at home. But it would be needless to attempt describing the particular characters of young people that had seen but very little of the world. In short, a family likeness prevailed through all, and properly speaking, they had but one character, that of being all equally generous, credulous, simple, and inoffensive.

Chapter 2

Family Misfortunes. The Loss of Fortune Only Serves to Increase the Pride of the Worthy

The temporal concerns of our family were chiefly committed to my wife's management, as to the spiritual I took them entirely under my own direction. The profits of my living, which amounted to but thirty-five pounds a year, I gave to the orphans and widows of the clergy of our diocese; for having a sufficient fortune of my own, I was careless of temporalities and felt a secret pleasure in doing my duty without reward. I also set a resolution of keeping no curate, and of being acquainted with every man in the parish, exhorting the married men to temperance and the bachelors to matrimony; so that in a few years it was a common saying that there were three strange wants at Wakefield, a parson wanting pride, young men wanting wives, and alehouses wanting customers.

Matrimony was always one of my favourite topics, and I wrote several sermons to prove its utility and happiness: but there was a peculiar tenet which I made a point of supporting; for I maintained with Whiston that it was unlawful for a priest of the church of England, after the death of his first wife, to take a second, or to express it in one word, I valued myself upon being a strict monogamist.

I was early initiated into this important dispute, on which so many laborious volumes have been written. I published some tracts upon the subject myself, which, as they never sold, I have the consolation of thinking are read only by the happy *Few*. Some of my friends called this my weak side; but alas! they had not like me made it the subject of long contemplation. The more I reflected upon it, the more important it appeared. I even went a step beyond Whiston in displaying my principles: as he had engraven upon his wife's tomb that she was the *only*

wife of William Whiston, so I wrote a similar epitaph for my wife, though still living, in which I extolled her prudence, economy, and obedience till death; and having got it copied fair, with an elegant frame, it was placed over the chimney-piece, where it answered several very useful purposes. It admonished my wife of her duty to me, and my fidelity to her; it inspired her with a passion for fame, and constantly put her in mind of her end.

It was thus, perhaps, from hearing marriage so often recommended, that my eldest son, just upon leaving college, fixed his affections upon the daughter of a neighbouring clergyman, who was a dignitary in the church, and in circumstances to give her a large fortune, but fortune was her smallest accomplishment. Miss Arabella Wilmot was allowed by all (except my two daughters), to be completely pretty. Her youth, health, and innocence were still heightened by a complexion so transparent, and such an happy sensibility of look, that even age could not gaze on with indifference. As Mr. Wilmot knew that I could make a very handsome settlement on my son, he was not averse to the match; so both families lived together in all that harmony which generally precedes an expected alliance. Being convinced by experience that the days of courtship are the most happy of our lives, I was willing enough to lengthen the period; and the various amusements which the young couple every day shared in each other's company seemed to increase their passion. We were generally awaked in the morning by music, and on fine days rode a-hunting. The hours between breakfast and dinner the ladies devoted to dress and study: they usually read a page, and then gazed at themselves in the glass, which even philosophers might own often presented the page of greatest beauty. At dinner my wife took the lead; for as she always insisted upon carving every thing herself, it being her mother's way, she gave us upon these occasions the history of every dish. When we had dined, to prevent the ladies leaving us, I generally ordered the table to be removed; and sometimes, with the music master's assistance, the girls would give us a very agreeable concert. Walking out, drinking tea, coun-