

MARGARET
OLIPHANT
THE DOCTOR'S
FAMILY
AND OTHER STORIES



THE WORLD'S CLASSICS

MARGARET OLIPHANT

The Doctor's Family
and Other Stories

Edited with an Introduction by

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Oxford New York

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

1986

Oxford University Press, Walton Street, Oxford OX2 6DP

*Oxford New York Toronto
Delhi Bombay Calcutta Madras Karachi
Kuala Lumpur Singapore Hong Kong Tokyo
Nairobi Dar es Salaam Cape Town
Melbourne Auckland*

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*Introduction, Note on the Text, Select Bibliography,
Chronology, and Explanatory Notes
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First issued as a World's Classics paperback 1986

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

*Oliphant, Mrs.
The doctor's family and other stories.—
(The World's classics)
I. Title II. Williams, Merryn
823'.8[F] PR5113.A4
ISBN 0-19-281733-7*

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

*Oliphant, Mrs. (Margaret), 1828-1897.
The doctor's family and other stories.
(The World's classics)
Bibliography: p.
I. Title.
PR5113.D6 1986 823'.8 85-15420
ISBN 0-19-281733-7 (pbk.)*

*Set by Grove Graphics
Printed in Great Britain by
Hazell Watson & Viney Ltd.
Aylesbury, Bucks*

INTRODUCTION

MARGARET OLIPHANT was one of the great Victorian novelists. Yet for much of the twentieth century her name has been almost unknown and her work largely unavailable. Only in the last few years have things begun to change; some of her best novels and short stories are coming back into print and more and more people are discovering them, with delight and excitement. The three stories in this volume represent her first mature work.

Briefly popular in the 1860s, she saw her reputation decline thereafter because she wrote far too much. All through her adult life she had to support various hard-up relations—husband, children, brothers, cousins, nephew, and nieces—and she could only do this by turning out books for sale. She sat up far into the night, like the heroine of *The Doctor's Family*, writing articles, translations, biographies, travel books, and nearly a hundred novels, most of them second-rate. It was easy for critics, then and now, to point out that she produced a vast amount of poor work. But, as a contemporary wrote, it is not true that 'her work at its best was injured by her immense productiveness. Her best work was of a very high order of merit. The harm that she did to her literary reputation seems rather the surrounding of her best with so much which she knew to be of inferior quality.'

Very early, she got into the habit of writing at the sitting-room table while the life of the household went on around her. Born into a fairly obscure family, Scottish Presbyterians who had moved to Liverpool, she published her first novel in 1849 when she was twenty-one. The fiction market was expanding, and she soon found that publishers were willing to take as many books as she could write. But her professional success was overshadowed by domestic troubles. Her brother, Willie, kept falling into debt and had bouts of drinking; when she was a teenager, Margaret and her mother sometimes sat up all night waiting for him to come home. He was sincerely

religious and found employment for a short time as a Presbyterian minister. But something went wrong and, rather than face a Church court which would have unfrocked him, he ran back to his family and was dependent on them for the rest of his life:

The days and weeks and months in which he smoked and read old novels and the papers and, most horrible of all, got to content himself with that life [his sister wrote long afterwards]. The anguish in all our hearts looking at him, not knowing what to do . . . the dreary spectacle of that content is before me, with almost as keen a sense of the misery as if it had been yesterday.

Fred Rider in *The Doctor's Family* is obviously based on Willie, although the latter had no wife or children. His brief career in the Church also had a lasting effect on Margaret's work. In *The Rector*, and in several full-length novels, she studies the psychology of the priest, the man who has taken it upon himself to guide others, but who is a vulnerable human being and may easily fail.

Willie's collapse came in 1852. Soon afterwards Margaret married her cousin, Frank Oliphant, an artist and stained-glass designer (whose work can still be seen in Ely Cathedral and Aylesbury parish church). She was always reticent about her marriage, but it was certainly not entirely happy. For the next seven years she was constantly pregnant—three babies died—and constantly writing; her earnings were needed to support the family because her husband's stained-glass business ate up money. She formed a close relationship with the editors of *Blackwood's Magazine*, which published several of her novels and articles in the 1850s. But Frank developed tuberculosis and in 1859 the Oliphants left England for Italy, where he died. Six weeks later, Margaret gave birth to another baby. She came home with her three small children and settled in Edinburgh, deeply in debt and desperate to find literary work.

For over a year, it was a very hard struggle. As she wrote in her *Autobiography*, her publishers had lost faith in her:

It was a very severe winter, 1860-61, and it was severe on me too . . . I had not been doing very well with my writing. I had sent several

articles, though of what nature I don't remember, to 'Blackwood', and they had been rejected. Why, this being the case, I should have gone to them (John Blackwood and the Major were the firm at that moment) to offer them, or rather to suggest to them that they should take a novel from me for serial publication, I can't tell . . . But I was in their debt, and had very little to go on with. They shook their heads of course, and thought it would not be possible to take such a story,—both very kind and truly sorry for me, I have no doubt. I think I see their figures now against the light . . . and myself all blackness and whiteness in my widow's dress, taking leave of them as if it didn't matter, and oh! so much afraid that they would see the tears in my eyes. I went home to my little ones, running to the door to meet me . . . and that night, as soon as I had got them all to bed, I sat down and wrote a story which I think was something about a lawyer, John Brownlow [*sic*], and which formed the first of the Carlingford series,—a series pretty well forgotten now, which made a considerable stir at the time, and *almost* made me one of the popularities of literature. *Almost*, never quite, though 'Salem Chapel' really went very near it, I believe. I sat up nearly all night in a passion of composition, stirred to the very bottom of my mind. The story was successful, and my fortune, comparatively speaking, was made.

No wonder she wrote, in the second chapter of *The Executor*, 'the poor woman was half-crazed with the whirl of passion in her brain'. That must have been exactly how she felt as she worked on the story, knowing it was her last chance.

The Executor was published in *Blackwood's* in May 1861, and *The Rector* and *The Doctor's Family* later that same year. Margaret was thirty-three, and had already written over twenty novels, none of them especially good. But with these stories, as I have written elsewhere, she suddenly made the breakthrough from hack-work to literature. The publishers and readers recognized their quality and in 1862 John Blackwood agreed to let her expand them into a series, *The Chronicles of Carlingford*.

The form of this series was influenced by George Eliot's *Scenes of Clerical Life* and Trollope's novels about 'Barset'. The setting is a quiet country town; the same characters appear in different works and the clergy are prominent figures (the public appetite for novels about clerics and religious

problems was almost insatiable). *The Doctor's Family* was followed by three full-length novels. *Salem Chapel* (1863) was unusual because it dealt with Dissenters rather than members of the Church of England, and was a great success. For a time it was attributed to George Eliot, who was not pleased. *The Perpetual Curate* (1864) completed the story of Mr Proctor, Frank Wentworth, and the two Miss Wodehouses which had begun in *The Rector*. The superb *Miss Marjoribanks* (1866)—whose heroine appears briefly in *The Doctor's Family*—is one of the few Oliphant novels to have been revived in our own time. *Phoebe, Junior: A Last Chronicle of Carlingford* (1876) was written much later, and is only loosely connected with the rest. The late Q. D. Leavis has argued that they should all be made available again 'since they can rival Trollope's Barchester series in several respects and contain material much more valuable as sociology and social criticism than anything in his'.

The Carlingford stories brought their creator fame and popularity. She was to write other, and even better, things, but, meanwhile, the Victorians knew that a remarkable young novelist had arrived.

If the three stories in this volume have one quality in common, it is their anti-romantic tone. Bessie marries a prosaic man twice her age because he is at least kind and reliable. The Rector gives up his foolish dreams of a young bride in favour of a more suitable marriage with a woman who shares his own disabilities; Nettie knows that the man she marries is not prepared to make any real sacrifices for her. Already the author was slightly contemptuous of happy endings and felt that there were more important questions than who married whom on the last page.

The Executor—which has not been reprinted before—is the weakest of the three. It is sharp and amusing, and we will have a better understanding of *The Doctor's Family* if we read it first. But there have been too many stories, then and since, about missing heirs and unjust wills. Margaret often fell back on this kind of plot in later years, when she needed to write something quickly, but she never succeeded in making it work

because, fundamentally, it bored her. If Wilkie Collins had written *The Executor*, everything would have hinged on the will and the hunt for Phoebe Thomson; in the story as it exists, they do not much matter. The real centre of interest is Bessie Christian, who has to 'carry her father on her shoulders, and drag her mother by her side wherever she goes'. She is set apart from 'those other smiling young women who were enjoying their youth', like Nettie in *The Doctor's Family*, and like the author, who had already had eighteen months' experience of being a young widow with children. Bessie herself is a rather flat character, conventionally sweet and patient, but she is extremely important for what she represents.

Margaret Oliphant had had some very hard experiences by the time she began to write the *Chronicles of Carlingford*. She had given birth to six children and buried three, got Willie out of various scrapes, undergone some painful domestic conflicts, and nursed her husband and mother through their last illnesses. (It is not surprising that death-beds are so important in *The Rector*.) Like all middle-class women at the time, she employed servants, but she still had to do a great deal of the child-minding and housework herself. She was acutely aware that however much she might have liked certain things, such as a perfect marriage or a life of pure intellectual activity, there were pressing jobs which had to be done, no matter how she felt. This awareness infuses these two small masterpieces, *The Rector* and *The Doctor's Family*.

'Now and then it feels hard, and all that,' says Nettie. 'But what did one come into the world for, I should like to know? Does anybody suppose it was just to be comfortable, and have one's own way?' In both stories, there is a distinction between those who do useful work and those who do not. At the end of *The Rector*, the central character decides that he needs a harder and more challenging life.

The story begins in a comfortable garden, separated by high walls from the 'dusty dry road'. The young author had never written anything better than the lyrical description of the fruit trees, the 'sweet summer snow', and the 'narcissus in a great

dazzling sheaf upon the grass'. There are no urgent problems in such a setting; we gather that Lucy and Wentworth are in love and can't get married, but this does not disturb us very much. We move on to lively comedy in the scenes between Mr Proctor and his mother (based on a real old lady whom Margaret had known in Edinburgh). In the end, though, *The Rector* turns out to be a profoundly serious work.

The Victorians, as has been said, were fascinated by novels about religion. Readers of Trollope will remember the battles between his High and Low Churchmen, and many other, long-forgotten writers produced novels arguing the case for their own sects. The first pages of *The Rector* describe the hostility between Wentworth and the late Mr Bury because one is 'on the very topmost pinnacle of Anglicanism' and the other was Evangelical. Having been brought up a Scottish Presbyterian, Margaret viewed the bitter feuds in the Church of England with some amusement. As the story develops, she reminds the reader that, after all, there are things which matter more.

No one can find out Mr Proctor's views—'High, or Low, or Broad'—perhaps because he is not sufficiently committed to the priesthood to have any. At first he thinks all he need do is deliver a weekly sermon, 'which nobody cared much about, and which disturbed nobody', and then go back to his Greek studies. Up to the age of fifty he has been 'living out of nature' as a Fellow of an Oxford college. This is not an attack on universities or the intellectual life as such. The point was that, in the 1860s, Oxford dons did live in an unnatural way, remaining in their colleges and in most cases being forbidden to marry. They were all clergymen, but spent far more time on the classics (which Margaret did not know and, I think, faintly despised) than on pastoral work.

As a result, Mr Proctor shrinks from his 'female parishioners' just as Dr Rider, in the next story, shrinks from children. He cannot even face getting married, let alone helping people in need. After he has failed to do any good to the tubercular woman, he asks himself:

What was he doing here, among that little world of human creatures who were dying, being born, perishing, suffering, falling into misfortune and anguish, and all manner of human vicissitudes, every day? Young Wentworth knew what to say to that woman in her distress; and so might the Rector, had her distress concerned a disputed translation, or a disused idiom.

In the end, he will have to come out of the walled garden and begin to grapple with 'the thorns and briars outside'.

The author considered the same question in a later novel, *The Curate in Charge*, which also has an Oxford don among its characters. He, too, worries about being cut off from ordinary human problems, and feels that he will only be saved by marrying a woman who has had a difficult time as the mainstay of her family. In most Oliphant novels, women are a good deal stronger than men and take on jobs—usually inside the home—which would appal them. As Dr Rider tells Nettie, who is looking after his brother's children, 'it ought to be my business quite as much as it is yours':

Nettie looked at him with a certain careless scorn of the inferior creature—'Ah, yes, I daresay; but then you are only a man', said Nettie.

We have already met the young doctor who got out of marrying Bessie Christian in *The Executor*. During the few months which separated these stories, Margaret had made enormous progress. There is no nonsense about missing heirs in *The Doctor's Family*; instead we have a serious and believable story about a man's fear of responsibility, and about the perennial contrast between those who give and those who take.

She also showed a new talent for creating character, particularly in the key figure of Nettie Underwood. There is a vast difference between the meek Bessie and this formidable young woman, 'flashing dangerous sudden glances', and not above throwing a 'stinging word' at Fred. Nettie, of course, is carrying the same kind of burdens as Margaret, and the author's sympathy for her is unmistakable. But she does not become over-involved with her heroine, as Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot so often did, with disastrous results for their work.

Dr Rider comes across as equally real, imperfect, and convincing. The depressing atmosphere of his house is evoked just as skilfully as the charming scene in Mr Wodehouse's garden. He gets a hangover after an 'unlovely evening' drinking with his brother; he grows 'furious over his charred chops and sodden potatoes' (more virile than the Rector, he is obviously sick of being a bachelor). His role is unheroic, but we sympathize with him because he is young, poor, hard-working, and in a highly unpleasant situation.

The situation is, briefly, that these two young people are expected to look after a pair of older relations who seem incapable of doing anything at all for themselves, and who have three small children. Modern readers who say that they should have refused to do it forget the social context. There was no Welfare State in those days to take care of people like Fred and Susan, and if their families had not helped them they would have ended up in the workhouse or in prison. Margaret Oliphant was already supporting one brother, Willie, when she began the *Chronicles of Carlingford*, and a few years later when a second brother and his family lost their income she looked after them, too. She is never known to have refused an appeal to her generosity, yet, like Nettie, she sometimes had doubts:

Was she so entirely *right* as she had supposed? Was it best to relieve the helpless hands of Fred and Susan of their natural duties, and bear these burdens for them, and disable herself, when her time came, from the nobler natural yoke in which her full womanly influence might have told to an extent impossible to it now?

Here she is not just considering the duties of the priest (as in *The Rector*), but, more fundamentally, the duties of all human beings towards each other. The question is 'dark and perplexing', a 'doubtful complicated matter, most hard and difficult of mortal problems', and yet many people would not even bother to ask it. The author's considered opinion was that people did have a responsibility to one another, and especially to their blood relations. But she did not pretend that this was easy, or even that it had a good effect on the

character. Dr Rider's servants sympathize with Fred because 'he is very good-natured, poor gentleman', and think his brother treats him harshly. Richard Chatham has much the same reaction to Nettie and Susan, and Susan herself regularly accuses her sister of having no feelings. As with Dickens's Harold Skimpole or Tolstoy's Stiva Oblonsky, the person who avoids responsibility is generally much better liked than the person who takes it on and is soured by it.

Compared to many Victorian novels, *The Doctor's Family* is an exceptionally tough-minded book. Margaret draws a distinction between the Rider children, who have a right to be cared for, and their appalling parents. But the children are not sentimentalized; they are 'intolerable little brats', 'detestable imps'. They scream and squabble and even the most likeable of them, Freddy, calmly tells Nettie that he will not require her when he is grown up. People who make sacrifices should not expect gratitude (this is a constant theme in Oliphant novels), for they will not get it.

Since the author had strong, even passionate feelings on the subject of givers and takers, we might have expected these feelings to spill over into the novel and ruin it. Yet her artistic control never falters. As she wrote a few years later of Jane Austen, 'she is not surprised or offended, much less horror-stricken or indignant, when her people show vulgar or mean traits of character, when they make it evident how selfish and self-absorbed they are'. The book is not solemn or tearful but, for most of the time, extremely funny. Consider the widowed Susan, 'carefully arranged upon the sofa, with a chair placed near for sympathizers'; we know that she has no real grief for her husband and will continue to be a dead weight on her sister but our instinct is to laugh rather than to be shocked. The same lightness of touch can be seen at the beginning of the second chapter:

Next morning Dr Rider rose mightily vexed with himself, as was to be supposed. He was half an hour late for breakfast: he had a headache, his hand shook, and his temper was 'awful'. Before he was dressed, ominous knocks came to the door; and all feverish and troubled as he was, you may imagine that the prospect of the day's

work before him did not improve his feelings, and that self-reproach, direst of tormentors, did not mend the matter.

The doctor has been drinking too much; he does not particularly like himself or the life he is leading; if it goes on, he could disintegrate and become the same type of man as Fred. All this information is quietly conveyed in the language of comedy. The situation was so dreadful—Margaret apparently felt—that she could only handle it through this kind of bitter humour.

The novel is, then, a comedy of sorts, and the Victorians would have expected a happy ending. But we do not see how Nettie can ever free herself from the five people who are dependent on her. It does not seem at all likely that Fred will stop drinking, or that Susan will suddenly become competent and sensible (although a lesser novelist might well have resorted to tricks of that kind). Nor do we believe that the Dr Rider we have come to know will agree to put up with the relations who are his as much as Nettie's. As the author says, not without sympathy, 'he could not alter his nature'.

The five dependants are gradually reduced to one through a series of twists in the plot which are unexpected, but satisfying. Fred is drowned; this may seem a little too convenient. But, after all, it is not unnatural that an alcoholic should die before his time, and it leads directly into the most serious and powerful section of the novel. His wife and children are not altered by his death (although Susan will take full advantage of it), and his brother is not deeply upset. The saddest thing is that Fred cannot be mourned as a better man would have been:

Nettie had not loved that shamed and ruined man—she had done him the offices of affection, and endured and sometimes scorned him. She stood remorseful by his side in that first dread hour, which had changed Fred's shabby presence into something awful; and her generous soul burst forth in that cry of penitence which every human creature owes its brother.

Nettie—whose feelings are little understood by those around her—reminds us that Fred was not simply an obstacle to the

young lovers' happiness but a human being who tragically wasted his life. At the same time there is no death-bed repentance, no suggestion that he has gone on to a better world. The mystery of his life and death is left to haunt Nettie, and the thoughtful reader.

Others may feel it is unlikely that Richard Chatham would appear from Australia at just the right time to take Susan off her sister's hands. Yet we all know that some women will find a man in the most unpromising circumstances, and, looking back, we see that it is not really so surprising. Susan is 'incapable of deep and permanent feeling', and the author has already hinted that although we find her repellent, other people, who stand in a different relation to her, may not. The moral significance of the event is that while Nettie has nerved herself to give up her own happiness for Susan's sake Susan will shake off Nettie, when it suits her, without a qualm.

By the end of the novel, then, Nettie has had to learn that she is not indispensable, and Dr Rider has had to accept Freddy (we are relieved that he is not to get off scot-free). They will settle into Carlingford society and be as happy as most people. Yet there is a hint, in the final pages, that this marriage will not be what Miss Wodehouse calls 'perfection'. After all, as Nettie says, 'an obstacle which is only removed by Richard Chatham . . . does not count for much'. The serious point which has been raised, 'Love, patience, charity . . . are but human qualities, when they have to be held against daily disgusts, irritations, and miseries,' remains true. The young couple have been lucky, but things might well have gone the other way. There is still a great gulf between the privileged and the unfortunate.

As a very young woman, Margaret Oliphant wrote books just like those of scores of minor novelists, in which all the clergymen are heroic and all the lovers devoted and faultless. By the time she wrote *The Rector* and *The Doctor's Family*, she had become a mature artist, whose work deals with recognizable human beings and explores extremely complex states of mind. She had learned a great deal from her own experience, and something, too, from the work of Jane Austen

and the early George Eliot. At her best, she is fully worthy to stand beside these two great novelists, and, in the two longer stories in this volume, she is very near her best. Many more famous Victorian 'classics' are far less vivid and disturbing.

NOTE ON THE TEXT

THE text of *The Executor* is that printed in *Blackwood's Magazine* in May 1861. *The Rector* and *The Doctor's Family* first appeared, also in *Blackwood's*, later in the same year, and were published in one volume in 1863. The present edition is based on that volume, which corrected some misprints and internal inconsistencies in the original text. A few other obvious errors have been silently corrected.

SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

MOST Oliphant novels, including some of the best, have long been out of print. The first to be rediscovered was *Miss Marjoribanks* (Zodiac Press, 1969, with an introduction by Q. D. Leavis). Two more novels, *Hester* (Virago Modern Classics, with an introduction by Jennifer Uglow), and *Kirsteen* (Everyman Classics, with an introduction by Merryn Williams), appeared in 1984. Her famous ghost story, 'The Open Door', is in several collections, the most recent being *The Penguin Book of Ghost Stories* (ed. J. A. Cuddon, 1984).

The Autobiography and Letters of Mrs M. O. W. Oliphant, edited by her cousin, Mrs Harry Coghill, appeared in 1899, two years after her death. It is a most moving document, and essential for those who want to know more about her, but it does not pretend to tell the full story of her life, and some of the most interesting letters (as well as parts of the manuscript text) have been left out. Mrs Coghill wrote a rather sentimental commentary which depicted the novelist as a much more conventional person than she really was. It was reissued by Leicester University Press in 1974, with an introduction and notes by Q. D. Leavis.

The Equivocal Virtue: Mrs Oliphant and the Victorian Literary Market Place, by Vineta and Robert A. Colby (1966), gives a full account of her relations with her publishers, and has two chapters on her works on the supernatural and the *Chronicles of Carlingford*. The biographical part of this book is sketchy, because at that time little was known about her life apart from what is in the *Autobiography*. But in 1973 her great-niece presented the National Library of Scotland with a very large collection of her private letters and other documents, and these were of great help to me when I was writing my own account of her, *Margaret Oliphant, A Critical Biography* (1986). The NLS also owns her letters to the Blackwoods, which fill several volumes. Letters to her other publishers, Bentley and Macmillan, are in the British Museum.

A full list of her novels and contributions to *Blackwood's Magazine* is provided in the *Autobiography*.

The *Chronicles of Carlingford* are discussed in *Gains and Losses: Novels of Faith and Doubt in Victorian England*, by Robert Lee Wolff (1977), and in *Victorian Popular Fiction 1860-80*, by R. C. Terry