

***WILLIAM
BLACK***



GOLDSMITH

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Goldsmith

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CHAPTER I.

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INTRODUCTORY.

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"Innocently to amuse the imagination in this dream of life is wisdom." So wrote Oliver Goldsmith; and surely among those who have earned the world's gratitude by this ministration he must be accorded a conspicuous place. If, in these delightful writings of his, he mostly avoids the darker problems of existence—if the mystery of the tragic and apparently unmerited and unrequited suffering in the world is rarely touched upon—we can pardon the omission for the sake of the gentle optimism that would rather look on the kindly side of life. "You come hot and tired from the day's battle, and this sweet minstrel sings to you," says Mr. Thackeray. "Who could harm the kind vagrant harper? Whom did he ever hurt? He carries no weapon save the harp on which he plays to you; and with which he delights great and humble, young and old, the captains in the tents, or the soldiers round the fire, or the women and children in the villages, at whose porches he stops and sings his simple songs of love and beauty." And it is to be suspected—it is to be hoped, at least—that the cheerfulness which shines like sunlight through Goldsmith's writings, did not altogether desert himself even in the most trying hours of his wayward and troubled career. He had, with all his sensitiveness, a fine happy-go-lucky disposition; was ready for a frolic when he had a guinea, and, when he had none, could turn a sentence

on the humorous side of starvation; and certainly never attributed to the injustice or neglect of society misfortunes the origin of which lay nearer home.

Of course, a very dark picture might be drawn of Goldsmith's life; and the sufferings that he undoubtedly endured have been made a whip with which to lash the ingratitude of a world not too quick to recognise the claims of genius. He has been put before us, without any brighter lights to the picture, as the most unfortunate of poor devils; the heart-broken usher; the hack ground down by sordid booksellers; the starving occupant of successive garrets. This is the aspect of Goldsmith's career which naturally attracts Mr. Forster. Mr. Forster seems to have been haunted throughout his life by the idea that Providence had some especial spite against literary persons; and that, in a measure to compensate them for their sad lot, society should be very kind to them, while the Government of the day might make them Companions of the Bath or give them posts in the Civil Service. In the otherwise copious, thorough, and valuable *Life and Times of Oliver Goldsmith*, we find an almost humiliating insistence on the complaint that Oliver Goldsmith did not receive greater recognition and larger sums of money from his contemporaries. Goldsmith is here "the poor neglected sizar"; his "marked ill-fortune" attends him constantly; he shares "the evil destinies of men of letters"; he was one of those who "struggled into fame without the aid of English institutions"; in short, "he wrote, and paid the penalty." Nay, even Christianity itself is impeached on account of the persecution suffered by poor Goldsmith. "There had been a

Christian religion extant for seventeen-hundred and fifty-seven years," writes Mr. Forster, "the world having been acquainted, for even so long, with its spiritual necessities and responsibilities; yet here, in the middle of the eighteenth century, was the eminence ordinarily conceded to a spiritual teacher, to one of those men who come upon the earth to lift their fellow-men above its miry ways. He is up in a garret, writing for bread he cannot get, and dunned for a milkscore he cannot pay." That Christianity might have been worse employed than in paying the milkman's score is true enough, for then the milkman would have come by his own; but that Christianity, or the state, or society should be scolded because an author suffers the natural consequences of his allowing his expenditure to exceed his income, seems a little hard. And this is a sort of writing that is peculiarly inappropriate in the case of Goldsmith, who, if ever any man was author of his own misfortunes, may fairly have the charge brought against him. "Men of genius," says Mr. Forster, "can more easily starve, than the world, with safety to itself, can continue to neglect and starve them." Perhaps so; but the English nation, which has always had a regard and even love for Oliver Goldsmith, that is quite peculiar in the history of literature, and which has been glad to overlook his faults and follies, and eager to sympathise with him in the many miseries of his career, will be slow to believe that it is responsible for any starvation that Goldsmith may have endured.

However, the key-note has been firmly struck, and it still vibrates. Goldsmith was the unluckiest of mortals, the hapless victim of circumstances. "Yielding to that united

pressure of labour, penury, and sorrow, with a frame exhausted by unremitting and ill-rewarded drudgery, Goldsmith was indebted to the forbearance of creditors for a peaceful burial." But what, now, if some foreigner strange to the traditions of English literature—some Japanese student, for example, or the New Zealander come before his time—were to go over the ascertained facts of Goldsmith's life, and were suddenly to announce to us, with the happy audacity of ignorance, that he, Goldsmith, was a quite exceptionally fortunate person? "Why," he might say, "I find that in a country where the vast majority of people are born to labour, Oliver Goldsmith was never asked to do a stroke of work towards the earning of his own living until he had arrived at man's estate. All that was expected of him, as a youth and as a young man, was that he should equip himself fully for the battle of life. He was maintained at college until he had taken his degree. Again and again he was furnished with funds for further study and foreign travel; and again and again he gambled his opportunities away. The constant kindness of his uncle only made him the best begging-letter-writer the world has seen. In the midst of his debt and distress as a bookseller's drudge, he receives £400 for three nights' performance of *The Good-Natured Man*; he immediately purchases chambers in Brick Court for £400; and forthwith begins to borrow as before. It is true that he died owing £2000, and was indebted to the forbearance of creditors for a peaceful burial; but it appears that during the last seven years of his life he had been earning an annual income equivalent to £800 of English currency.[\[1\]](#) He was a man liberally and affectionately

brought up, who had many relatives and many friends, and who had the proud satisfaction—which has been denied to many men of genius—of knowing for years before he died that his merits as a writer had been recognised by the great bulk of his countrymen. And yet this strange English nation is inclined to suspect that it treated him rather badly; and Christianity is attacked because it did not pay Goldsmith's milkscore."

Footnote

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[1] The calculation is Lord Macaulay's: see his *Biographical Essays*.

Our Japanese friend may be exaggerating; but his position is after all fairly tenable. It may at least be looked at, before entering on the following brief *résumé* of the leading facts in Goldsmith's life, if only to restore our equanimity. For, naturally, it is not pleasant to think that any previous generation, however neglectful of the claims of literary persons (as compared with the claims of such wretched creatures as physicians, men of science, artists, engineers, and so forth) should so cruelly have ill-treated one whom we all love now. This inheritance of ingratitude is more than we can bear. Is it true that Goldsmith was so harshly dealt with by those barbarian ancestors of ours?

CHAPTER II.

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SCHOOL AND COLLEGE.

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The Goldsmiths were of English descent; Goldsmith's father was a Protestant clergyman in a poor little village in the county of Longford; and when Oliver, one of several children, was born in this village of Pallas, or Pallasmore, on the 10th November, 1728, the Rev. Charles Goldsmith was passing rich on £40 a year. But a couple of years later Mr. Goldsmith succeeded to a more lucrative living; and forthwith removed his family to the village of Lissoy, in the county of Westmeath.

Here at once our interest in the story begins: is this Lissoy the sweet Auburn that we have known and loved since our childhood? Lord Macaulay, with a great deal of vehemence, avers that it is not; that there never was any such hamlet as Auburn in Ireland; that *The Deserted Village* is a hopelessly incongruous poem; and that Goldsmith, in combining a description of a probably Kentish village with a description of an Irish ejection, "has produced something which never was, and never will be, seen in any part of the world." This criticism is ingenious and plausible, but it is unsound, for it happens to overlook one of the radical facts of human nature—the magnifying delight of the mind in what is long remembered and remote. What was it that the imagination of Goldsmith, in his life-long banishment, could not see when he looked back to the home of his childhood,

and his early friends, and the sports and occupations of his youth? Lissoy was no doubt a poor enough Irish village; and perhaps the farms were not too well cultivated; and perhaps the village preacher, who was so dear to all the country round, had to administer many a thrashing to a certain graceless son of his; and perhaps Paddy Byrne was something of a pedant; and no doubt pigs ran over the "nicely sanded floor" of the inn; and no doubt the village statesmen occasionally indulged in a free fight. But do you think that was the Lissoy that Goldsmith thought of in his dreary lodgings in Fleet-Street courts? No. It was the Lissoy where the vagrant lad had first seen the "primrose peep beneath the thorn"; where he had listened to the mysterious call of the bittern by the unfrequented river; it was a Lissoy still ringing with the glad laughter of young people in the twilight hours; it was a Lissoy for ever beautiful, and tender, and far away. The grown-up Goldsmith had not to go to any Kentish village for a model; the familiar scenes of his youth, regarded with all the wistfulness and longing of an exile, became glorified enough. "If I go to the opera where Signora Colomba pours out all the mazes of melody," he writes to Mr. Hodson, "I sit and sigh for Lissoy's fireside, and *Johnny Armstrong's Last Good Night* from Peggy Golden."

There was but little in the circumstances of Goldsmith's early life likely to fit him for, or to lead him into, a literary career; in fact, he did not take to literature until he had tried pretty nearly everything else as a method of earning a living. If he was intended for anything, it was no doubt his father's wish that he should enter the Church; and he got such education as the poor Irish clergyman—who was not a

very provident person—could afford. The child Goldsmith was first of all taught his alphabet at home, by a maid-servant, who was also a relation of the family; then, at the age of six, he was sent to that village school which, with its profound and learned master, he has made familiar to all of us; and after that he was sent further a-field for his learning, being moved from this to the other boarding-school as the occasion demanded. Goldsmith's school-life could not have been altogether a pleasant time for him. We hear, indeed, of his being concerned in a good many frolics—robbing orchards, and the like; and it is said that he attained proficiency in the game of fives. But a shy and sensitive lad like Goldsmith, who was eagerly desirous of being thought well of, and whose appearance only invited the thoughtless but cruel ridicule of his schoolmates, must have suffered a good deal. He was little, pitted with the small-pox, and awkward; and schoolboys are amazingly frank. He was not strong enough to thrash them into respect of him; he had no big brother to become his champion; his pocket-money was not lavish enough to enable him to buy over enemies or subsidise allies.

In similar circumstances it has sometimes happened that a boy physically inferior to his companions has consoled himself by proving his mental prowess—has scored off his failure at cricket by the taking of prizes, and has revenged himself for a drubbing by writing a lampoon. But even this last resource was not open to Goldsmith. He was a dull boy; "a stupid, heavy blockhead," is Dr. Streaan's phrase in summing up the estimate formed of young Goldsmith by his contemporaries at school. Of course, as soon as he became

famous, everybody began to hunt up recollections of his having said or done this or that, in order to prove that there were signs of the coming greatness. People began to remember that he had been suspected of scribbling verses, which he burned. What schoolboy has not done the like? We know how the biographers of great painters point out to us that their hero early showed the bent of his mind by drawing the figures of animals on doors and walls with a piece of chalk; as to which it may be observed that, if every schoolboy who scribbled verses and sketched in chalk on a brick wall, were to grow up a genius, poems and pictures would be plentiful enough. However, there is the apparently authenticated anecdote of young Goldsmith's turning the tables on the fiddler at his uncle's dancing-party. The fiddler, struck by the odd look of the boy who was capering about the room, called out "Æsop!" whereupon Goldsmith is said to have instantly replied,

"Our herald hath proclaimed this saying,
See Æsop dancing and his monkey playing!"

But even if this story be true, it is worth nothing as an augury; for quickness of repartee was precisely the accomplishment which the adult Goldsmith conspicuously lacked. Put a pen into his hand, and shut him up in a room: then he was master of the situation—nothing could be more incisive, polished, and easy than his playful sarcasm. But in society any fool could get the better of him by a sudden question followed by a horse-laugh. All through his life—even after he had become one of the most famous of living writers—Goldsmith suffered from want of self-confidence. He

was too anxious to please. In his eager acquiescence, he would blunder into any trap that was laid for him. A grain or two of the stolid self-sufficiency of the blockheads who laughed at him would not only have improved his character, but would have considerably added to the happiness of his life.

As a natural consequence of this timidity, Goldsmith, when opportunity served, assumed airs of magnificent importance. Every one knows the story of the mistake on which *She Stoops to Conquer* is founded. Getting free at last from all the turmoil, and anxieties, and mortifications of school-life, and returning home on a lent hack, the released schoolboy is feeling very grand indeed. He is now sixteen, would fain pass for a man, and has a whole golden guinea in his pocket. And so he takes the journey very leisurely until, getting benighted in a certain village, he asks the way to the "best house," and is directed by a facetious person to the house of the squire. The squire by good luck falls in with the joke; and then we have a very pretty comedy indeed—the impecunious schoolboy playing the part of a fine gentleman on the strength of his solitary guinea, ordering a bottle of wine after his supper, and inviting his landlord and his landlord's wife and daughter to join him in the supper-room. The contrast, in *She Stoops to Conquer*, between Marlow's embarrassed diffidence on certain occasions and his audacious effrontery on others, found many a parallel in the incidents of Goldsmith's own life; and it is not improbable that the writer of the comedy was thinking of some of his own experiences, when he made Miss Hardcastle say to her timid suitor: "A want of courage upon

some occasions assumes the appearance of ignorance, and betrays us when we most want to excel."

It was, perhaps, just as well that the supper, and bottle of wine, and lodging at Squire Featherston's had not to be paid for out of the schoolboy's guinea; for young Goldsmith was now on his way to college, and the funds at the disposal of the Goldsmith family were not over abundant. Goldsmith's sister having married the son of a well-to do man, her father considered it a point of honour that she should have a dowry: and in giving her a sum of £400 he so crippled the means of the family, that Goldsmith had to be sent to college not as a pensioner but as a sizar. It appears that the young gentleman's pride revolted against this proposal; and that he was won over to consent only by the persuasions of his uncle Contarine, who himself had been a sizar. So Goldsmith, now in his eighteenth year, went to Dublin; managed somehow or other—though he was the last in the list—to pass the necessary examination; and entered upon his college career (1745.)

How he lived, and what he learned, at Trinity College, are both largely matters of conjecture; the chief features of such record as we have are the various means of raising a little money to which the poor sizar had to resort; a continual quarrelling with his tutor, an ill-conditioned brute, who baited Goldsmith and occasionally beat him; and a chance frolic when funds were forthcoming. It was while he was at Trinity College that his father died; so that Goldsmith was rendered more than ever dependent on the kindness of his uncle Contarine, who throughout seems to have taken much interest in his odd, ungainly nephew. A loan from a friend or

a visit to the pawnbroker tided over the severer difficulties; and then from time to time the writing of street-ballads, for which he got five shillings a-piece at a certain repository, came in to help. It was a happy-go-lucky, hand-to-mouth sort of existence, involving a good deal of hardship and humiliation, but having its frolics and gaieties notwithstanding. One of these was pretty near to putting an end to his collegiate career altogether. He had, smarting under a public admonition for having been concerned in a riot, taken seriously to his studies and had competed for a scholarship. He missed the scholarship, but gained an exhibition of the value of thirty shillings; whereupon he collected a number of friends of both sexes in his rooms, and proceeded to have high jinks there. In the midst of the dancing and uproar, in comes his tutor, in such a passion that he knocks Goldsmith down. This insult, received before his friends, was too much for the unlucky sizar, who, the very next day, sold his books, ran away from college, and ultimately, after having been on the verge of starvation once or twice, made his way to Lissoy. Here his brother got hold of him; persuaded him to go back; and the escapade was condoned somehow. Goldsmith remained at Trinity College until he took his degree (1749.) He was again lowest in the list; but still he had passed; and he must have learned something. He was now twenty-one, with all the world before him; and the question was as to how he was to employ such knowledge as he had acquired.
