



## OUR "POETS' CORNER."

OLIVER GOLDSMITH (1728).

"A MAN he was to all the country dear,  
And passing rich with forty pounds a year;  
Remote from towns, he ran his godly race,  
Nor e'er had changed, nor wished to change,  
his place."

Such was the description given by Oliver Goldsmith of his father, when, at the lonely hamlet of Pallas, in the county of Longford, he was curate of the remote district. In the old parsonage-house there was already a large family of children when Oliver made his appearance, for he was the sixth of the flock. To increase his scanty income, and feed and clothe his little ones, the good curate hired some fields, and at leisure times tilled them, and gathered in the crops; but it must have been a hard struggle to live, even with this addition. The duties of benevolence were not forgotten through all, for Oliver tells us—

"His house was known to all the vagrant train,  
He chid their wanderings, but relieved their pain;  
The long-remembered beggar was his guest,  
Whose beard descending swept his aged breast;  
The ruined spendthrift, now no longer proud,  
Claimed kindred there, and had his claims allowed."

After some years the curate received preferment in the Church, and became rector of Kilkenny West, with a stipend of £200 a year. Of course this was comparative wealth to the little family. The father took a large, rambling farmhouse near the village of Lishoy, and here young Oliver passed his boyhood. He rambled about the lanes and fields, his busy brain collecting all the while rich stores of material for his future poems. But his genius was not visible to careless eyes in these early days, for his teachers and tutors could make nothing of the "dull boy" who had no application for hard, steady work. Unfortunately, Oliver caught the small-pox in its worst form; and though he struggled through the terrible attack with his life, there were yet deep and indelible marks left upon his face that materially took from his good looks. His companions laughed at the slow, ungainly lad; and though he bore their bantering patiently enough, only retorting by a quick flash of wit or pointed repartee, his school life could not have been a happy one.

Nor at college had he a much more genial experience. As his father was too poor to pay the usual charges for a student, Goldsmith tried for a sizarship, and gaining it, was admitted to Trinity College, Dublin. At this period many menial duties and much drudgery were attached to this post, and they were imposed without stint on the shy, awkward youth, who was at once friendless and poor. His tutor also, one Wilder, treated him with great harshness, so persistent that it almost seemed like personal enmity.

Soon after he entered college his father died, and Goldsmith became poorer than ever. It is said he wrote songs, and sold them at 5s. each to buy food for himself. From his earliest youth Oliver never learned the judicious management of money. When he had any, he

would either give it all to those who wanted it more than himself, or he would waste it in utter folly. While at college, though he failed in getting a scholarship, he yet succeeded in gaining an "exhibition," and to celebrate this event he gave a party in his rooms to some students. While the mirth and festivity were at their height—noisy and boisterous enough, no doubt—his tutor threw open his door and began to storm and fume at Goldsmith, who retorted, and was in the end struck down by Wilder's strong hand. This so enraged and mortified the poet that he sold his books and effects, and with the small sum of money he gained left the college in high wrath. But ere long his money was squandered, and his brother Henry found him in abject distress, and persuaded him to forget the affront and return to college again. The advice proved good; by the next year he obtained a premium, and ere long his degree of Bachelor of Arts.

Oliver then went to visit his mother, who was living near the scene of her late husband's curacy near Pallas. His brother Henry was by this time curate of Lishoy, his father's old parish. Here Oliver passed two years, apparently not doing much good for himself. Sometimes he composed verses, or played on his flute, or wandered about over the country; and occasionally he helped his brother to teach the village school-children. It had always been intended Oliver should take Holy Orders, but he failed in this. Next he studied law, but only to give his friends a fresh disappointment. Afterwards it was suggested he should study medicine, and the necessary funds were provided by his uncle Contarine, who had befriended him through all his failures and follies. So Oliver went to Edinburgh, and became a medical student, and finally took his degree at Louvaine. Surely, never was there such an erratic career!

For one year we find Goldsmith travelling on the continent on a pedestrian expedition, with very little money in his pockets, and with his flute for a companion. In this way he went through Italy, France, Switzerland, Germany, and Holland, walking from town to town, studying the human character in all its aspects, as well as enjoying the vast and varied beauties of nature. He says he often and often won both bed and food by his performances on his flute. When he came near a village, or a peasant's house, he would begin a lively tune, and the kindhearted people would invite him to stay and share their humble fare, and rest himself on the way.

On his return to London, Goldsmith's prospects had not brightened. At one time he practised as doctor to the poor at Bankside, but got only few fees. Again, he was a tutor in a school at Peckham; and again, employed as reader and corrector of the press for Richardson the publisher. At one time he was "writing and starving" in a garret; by-and-by he was dressed up in borrowed clothes, fruitlessly seeking for the situation of doctor to a factory on the coast of Coromandel. At last appeared his *Essay on the Polite Literature of Europe*, and critics began to agree the work was far in advance of any

compositions of the day; and by this venture on his part Goldsmith attracted the notice of the great lexicographer Johnson, who speedily employed him in writing essays, some of which were called *The Citizen of the World*.

Poor Goldsmith had now caught a smile from fickle Fortune; but as soon as money was earned it was again spent with reckless extravagance, and he seemed to forget he had ever suffered from want. As book after book of his appeared, clever men sought his acquaintance, and his literary reputation increased rapidly. But ere long we find he was in debt for arrears of rent to his landlady, and to rescue him from this dilemma his friend Johnson sold a manuscript Goldsmith had just finished—the now well-known "Vicar of Wakefield"—for £60.

Goldsmith's poem, "The Traveller," gives a vivid description of the experience he gained during his journeyings on the continent, and as a recognition of his brother Henry's kindness it was dedicated to him. The story is simple enough. A traveller, lingering amidst the eternal silence of the Alpine mountains, is supposed to look down on many lands; and though he admires them all, he marvels in which of them he could find true happiness. He passes each realm in review, with its government, its manners, its faults, in a series of poetic pictures, exquisitely beautiful and vivid. This poem was a great success in its day; new editions were rapidly called for, and it holds its place still as one of our finest English poems. Four years before his death Goldsmith published his "*Deserted Village*," which has always been universally popular. It begins with a glowing description of the hamlet:—

"Sweet Auburn! loveliest village of the plain,  
Where health and plenty cheered the labouring swain;  
Where smiling spring its earliest visit paid,  
And parting summer's lingering bloom delayed."

But a change comes over the scene. The rich man wants room for his lake and park, his stables and hunting grounds; and so in his "wealth and pride," he "takes up a space that many poor supplied;" and in the end—

"Scourged by famine from the smiling land,  
The mournful peasant leads his humble band;  
And while he sinks, without one arm to save,  
The country blooms—a garden and a grave."

Goldsmith also wrote a *History of England, of Rome, and Greece, Animated Nature*, and two celebrated dramatic pieces, called *The Goodnatured Man*, and *She Stoops to Conquer*.

He died at the age of forty-six, much lamented by friends, who, though not blind to his faults, loved him for his unbounded generosity, his manly independence, his enlightened views, and his genial nature; the public lamented him also. Recognising the great work he had already done, it was natural to suppose, had he been spared longer, he might have done much more, greater and grander still!