

Oliver Goldsmith.



PERHAPS no writer of equal prominence is less read nowadays than the English classic whose name heads this paper. The contemporary and friend of Samuel Johnson, Garrick, Boswell, and Burke, his pen was a most prolific one. Hardly anything came amiss to it; from a child's toy-book to a philosophical treatise, all were treated with seeming facility. Yet to-day he is known only by his two principal poems, the *Traveler* and the *Deserted Village*, and the *Vicar of Wakefield* and *She Stoops to Conquer*, which incomparable comedy will probably endure as long as the language in which it is written.

Oliver Goldsmith was born of parents of Saxon descent and Protestant faith, in the hamlet of Pallasmore, County Longford, Ireland, November 10, 1728. His father was a clergyman of the Established Church, who had been educated at the school of Elphin, had married the daughter of his schoolmaster, shortly before taking orders, and eventually settled in the village named, where he eked out a scanty subsistence, partly as a small farmer and partly as assistant to the rector of an adjoining parish, by which he contrived to earn the sum of forty pounds a year. Pallasmore was then—and the same is true to-day to a great extent—as much isolated from the civilized world as the wilds of Africa, so that when our hero was about six years old, and his father was presented to a living in Kilkenny West, County Westmeath, worth two hundred pounds a year, it was hailed as a welcome change by all, and the family henceforth resided in a comfortable dwelling near the village of Lissay.

The childhood of Oliver gave no indications of his future brilliant intellect. His first instructor was the village schoolmaster, whose accomplishments were of the scantiest, but who possessed what was far dearer to the heart of the boy—an inexhaustible fund of legends, fairy tales, and the wondrous exploits of the Rapparee chiefs Baldearg O'Donnell and Galloping Hogan. To this early instruction may be traced many of the subsequent creations of his pupil's fancy. His education was further advanced, as he grew older, by attendance at several grammar schools, where he seems to have attained to some knowledge of the ancient languages. If we are to believe the accounts which have come to us, his life at this time was far from happy. Having suffered from an attack of small-pox while on a visit to a relative, his appearance was anything but prepossessing; added to this was an ungainly, stunted figure, so that his schoolmates, with the usual thoughtlessness of boys, were not slow to make him the butt of many a random jest. In addition, he was a dunce at his lessons, or at least showed no aptitude for study, the result being that he was "flogged

as a dunce in the school-room, and pointed at as a fright in the play-ground."

His elder brother, Henry, being at this time at Dublin University, several relatives contributed to extend the same advantages to Oliver, and he accordingly went to Dublin in his eighteenth year. He was, however, forced to enter as a sizar or poor scholar, the duties of whom were menial in the extreme, such as waiting on the fellows' table, sweeping, and so on.

At college, as at school, he was continually in trouble. His love of fun and mischief and dislike of steady application soon brought him into bad odor with his superiors. He was frequently disgraced in his class by playing the buffoon during recitations, came very near being dismissed for pumping on a constable, and was thrashed by his tutor for giving a party in his room to a number of young men and women from the city.

As a result of this caning he ran away from college. There is no doubt that this tutor, the Rev. Mr. Wilder, a man of most ungovernable temper, exercised a most unfavorable influence upon his pupil. Much might have been accomplished by one who would have drawn the young man's abilities out, so to speak, instead of exercising a repressing and chilling influence over him. Henry Goldsmith, however, induced Oliver to return to college, and effected a reconciliation between him and his tutor.

While our hero was leading a rather vagabond life in Dublin, his father died, almost penniless. He was now reduced to great straits, and managed to eke out a miserable existence by borrowing money, pawning his books, and occasionally selling a ballad, of which he wrote not a few. Owing to his desultory habits of study, he never obtained any eminence at college, and only just succeeded in obtaining his degree, February 27, 1749; nearly four years after his entrance. His education had fitted him for no calling, yet it was necessary that he should do something for himself. He returned home, but his friends could not assist him. At length, he appears to have decided on studying for the church, probably, as one writer has pointed out, because the expense was less, and because the standard of character was lower than that required for any other profession.

He spent two years of desultory reading, during which time he alternated between his mother's house and the village inn. At length he presented himself to the Bishop of Elphin for ordination, and here is given a remarkable instance of his want of mental balance. He appeared before the astonished bishop in a suit of scarlet clothes, and was, as might have been expected, promptly rejected. After a few months spent as tutor in a private family, which position he threw up on account of a dispute with one of its members over cards, he determined to emigrate to America. He set out for Cork, after having been supplied by his relations with £30 and a good horse. But again his evil star was in the ascendant. The vessel in which he had engaged his passage was detained by contrary winds, and when at last she did set sail it was without poor Oliver, who was engaged in a carouse with some boon

companions in the town. In a few weeks after setting out, he returned to Lissay on a miserable hack and without a penny in his pocket. Next he resolved to study law, and a generous uncle advanced him fifty pounds. Again he turned his steps toward Dublin, but was there enticed into a gaming house, and robbed of every penny. His mortification at these repeated failures was excessive, and as a last resource he thought of medicine. With this view he proceeded to Edinburgh, where he spent more than a year in much the same way as at Dublin University. At last, his creditors became importunate, and to escape the bailiffs he crossed over to the continent. He spent some time at Leyden, still under the pretense of studying medicine, but he left that celebrated university in his twenty-seventh year, without a degree, and with no property but the clothes on his back and his flute. This last, however, proved a good friend. He rambled on foot through France and Switzerland in a manner that is best described by himself:—"I had some knowledge of music, with a tolerable voice, and now turned what was my amusement into a present means of subsistence. I passed among the harmless peasants of Flanders, and among such of the French as were poor enough to be very merry, for I ever found them sprightly in proportion to their wants. Whenever I approached a peasant's house at night-fall, I played one of my most merry tunes, and that procured me not only lodging but subsistence for the next day." Arriving in Italy, however, his musical talents were at a discount, for the poorest peasant could both play and sing far better than he. But in a novel way he obtained food and lodging, which we shall let him describe in his own words:—"In all the foreign universities and convents there are, upon certain days, philosophical theses maintained against every adventitious disputant; for which, if the champion opposes with any dexterity, he can claim a gratuity in money, a dinner, and a bed for one night. In this manner, therefore, I fought my way toward England; walked along from city to city; examined mankind more clearly; and, if I may so express it, saw both sides of the picture."

In Macaulay's essay the opinion is expressed, however, that this part of his narrative should be taken with a grain of salt; for Goldsmith was never distinguished for accuracy of statement where facts were concerned. Certainly it is hard to believe that one who made such a sorry showing during his own college career, should be able to dispute with any sort of success. This belief is still further borne out by what we know of him in his later and more prosperous days. It was Garrick who said of him that "he wrote like an angel, but talked like poor Poll"—referring to the well-known fact that while his writings are models of polished elegance, yet as soon as he opened his mouth to speak in company, he invariably covered himself with ridicule, and though this occurred times without number, yet he could not hold his tongue—he persisted in trying to do the one thing he could not do.

Early in the year 1756 the adventurer landed at Dover, penniless and friendless. "In the

middle of February he was wandering without friend or acquaintance, without the knowledge or comfort of one kind face, in the lonely and terrible London streets." In the next three years his life was a troubled one. He tried in succession a series of desperate expedients. He was strolling player, usher in a school, errand boy for druggists, a writer of pamphlets, and even endeavored to obtain a position as surgeon's mate on a man-of-war. In the end he became a contributor to the press—a most miserable calling in those days. In a squalid garret, in a locality which has long since disappeared before the march of modern improvements, he settled down, at thirty years of age, into a drudgery of the most wearing and degrading kind. Here he wrote for dear life, and often barely gained bread. This was probably the most prolific period of his pen—but very little, comparatively, has been preserved to us—a large part was of only transient interest; his *History of England*, his *Life of Beau Nash*, his *Polite Literature*, his articles on London society, are all worthy of mention, although the *History* has long been superseded as a text-book. Macaulay says: "He was, indeed, emphatically, a popular writer. . . . About everything that he wrote, serious or sportive, there was a certain natural grace and decorum, hardly to be expected from a man a great part of whose life had been passed among thieves and beggars in those squalid dens which are the reproach of great capitals."

Goldsmith was now on the high road to prosperity. He was constantly employed at work which, if it did not add to his fame, at least filled his pocket. At length, in 1764, he gave to the world his poem the *Traveler*—the first which had appeared over his signature, and it at once raised him to the front rank of writers, and the critics were unanimous in its praise. It had a rapid sale, and within a very short time ran through four editions—something unprecedented at that time. This was followed by the *Vicar of Wakefield*, and the manner in which this was given to the public is worth relating.

At the end of the year in which he published the *Traveler*, his rent was so far in arrear that he was threatened with arrest by the sheriff. In his trouble he sent for Doctor Johnson, who sent him a guinea by the messenger, and promised to follow in person. On entering Goldsmith's room he found that he had broken the guinea for a bottle of wine, and was scolding his landlady as he lay in bed. In answer to Johnson's inquiries, he said that he had a novel ready for the press. Johnson looked through it, saw at a glance that there was something in it, took it to a bookseller, and, by the force of his recommendation obtained £60 for it, and soon returned with the money. The story goes that Goldsmith paid his rent and invited his landlady to bear him company over a bowl of punch. The novel which was thus given to the world had an unparalleled success—a success that has continued down to our own time—and probably will continue to be read while the language has a name. Lord Macaulay says it has "caused as much harmless mirth as has ever been caused by matter packed into so small a number of pages."

Some five years later, appeared the *Deserted Village*. Its success was only equaled by that of the *Traveler*. It is supposed to have portrayed life in the village of Pallasmore, where his father officiated in his young days, and who is referred to in the lines,

"A man he was to all the country dear,
And passing rich on forty pounds a year."

As has been pointed out by good critics, Macaulay among others, there is one glaring inconsistency pervading the whole poem. He says, "The poem is made up of incongruous parts. The village in its happy days is a true English village; the village in its decay is an Irish village. The felicity and misery which Goldsmith has brought together belong to two different countries, and to two different stages in the progress of society. He had, assuredly, never seen in his native island such a rural paradise, such a seat of plenty, content, and tranquillity, as his 'Auburn.' He had, assuredly, never seen in England all the inhabitants of such a paradise turned out of their homes in one day, and forced to emigrate in a body to America. The hamlet he had probably seen in Kent; the ejection he had probably seen in Munster; but, by joining the two, he has produced something which never was and never will be seen in any part of the world." To the candid reader this criticism will appear perfectly just; as a fancy sketch it might pass inspection, but as a picture of facts, it was open to just the objection that Macaulay urged against it, although, as a poem, he is loud in its praise.

In 1773 was brought out, at Covent Garden Theater, that incomparable comedy, "*She Stoops to Conquer*." Its success was instantaneous, although the author had to combat a nawkish public taste which, at that time, demanded that decorum should not be violated by so much as a smile. On this account the enthusiasm with which it was received was the more remarkable, and it netted the author a very handsome sum.

Besides the works just enumerated, he had been employed on several books for the use of schools—all of which have long since been superseded as text-books. Indeed, his method of compilation was so loose, that the wonder is now that any publisher should have been willing to publish them. He seems to have merely taken his materials from such books as were already in existence and translated them into his own inimitable style, and he unfortunately copied blunders and facts alike. Doctor Johnson said of him, that if he could tell a horse from a cow, that was the extent of his knowledge on zoölogy. In his history of England, he says that Naseby is in Yorkshire, and a most ludicrous story is told of him when he was engaged in writing his *History of Greece*. He asked Gibbon, the great historian, "what was the name of that Indian king who fought a battle with Alexander the Great?" "Montezuma," said Gibbon, in a spirit of waggery. No sooner said than Goldsmith wrote it down, and it would have gone forth to the world had not Gibbon affected to recollect that he had made a mistake, and told him that the right name was Porus. Also, in

his *Animated Nature*, he gives credence to all the nursery fables, and states as grave facts the existence of nightingales that talked, and of a race of giants in Patagonia, and monkeys that preached sermons to travelers. On another occasion, he maintained with great persistency before a considerable company, that he chewed his food by moving his upper jaw.

He was now, in the year 1773, at the height of his fame. He was the friend and companion of such men as Burke, Johnson, Boswell, Garrick, and Reynolds. His income was probably equal to that of any of his friends, and yet he was always in money difficulties, owing to his extravagance and thoughtless generosity. His health, too, began to fail—the result of his irregular manner of life. His custom when engaged in any literary work was to shut himself up, and take no pleasure or exercise until his task was finished. At its conclusion, however, he would plunge recklessly into all the gayety and riotous living of fashionable life. No constitution could long bear up under such a strain. In addition, he was harassed by the thought that he was heavily in debt. In his earlier days this would have troubled him but little—a few months of hard work would have cleared off his indebtedness. But now his powers refused to answer to the requirements put upon them. He had obtained advances from publishers on the strength of books which he was to write, but it was now highly improbable that they would ever be commenced. At length he broke down completely, and was attacked by a nervous fever, which was probably aggravated by his insistence on prescribing for himself. Failing to gain any relief, he was prevailed upon to call in two regular practitioners, but his weakness continued. His last words were in reply to a question by one of his attendants as to whether his mind was at ease, to which he answered "It is not." He expired April 4th, 1774, in his forty-sixth year, and was buried in the Temple church-yard, but all record of the place is now lost. A few of his most faithful friends followed him to the grave, it having been inteded to have given him an imposing funeral; but when the extent of his indebtedness became known, this design was abandoned.

Shortly after his death appeared a poem, which is referred to by Macaulay in the following words: "Within a small compass he drew with a singularly easy and vigorous pencil the characters of nine or ten of his intimate friends. Though this little work did not receive his last touches, it must always be regarded as a masterpiece."

Doctor Johnson having written an inscription, it was placed on a cenotaph in Westminster Abbey at the expense of some of his former associates, and it is all we have to mark his memory. Little does he need it, however, for he lives again in the matchless creations of his pen.

Should this necessarily incomplete sketch awaken in any a desire to become more fully acquainted with Oliver Goldsmith, the intensely interesting biography by Mr. Forster, and also that of Mr. Prior may be mentioned as well worthy of perusal.