CLASSICS LIBRARY · STORY MAP

The Vicar of Wakefield

Oliver Goldsmith · *1766 · original English text*

Dr. Primrose, a country vicar of cheerful piety and a large family, loses his fortune and must take a poorer living. Swindlers, an abduction, a prison, and a late reversal test his doctrine that the honest man who raises a family serves more than the man who only talks of population. Oliver Goldsmith's short novel is comic, sentimental, and serious about Providence.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

Can a vicar's patience and cheerfulness outlast real ruin—and is his faith wisdom, or a simplicity the rascals of the world will always use?

"the nakedness of the indigent world may be cloathed from the trimmings of the vain."

The family discussion of dress and charity, in the early chapters

Primrose is sometimes a dupe: of Mr. Jenkinson's bargains, of town fashions, of Squire Thornhill's charm. His daughters' vanity and his own innocence cost the family dearly. Yet his sermon in prison, his refusal to surrender Olivia, and his stubborn hope are not merely comic. The plot's last unmaskings—Sir William Thornhill in disguise, a marriage valid after all, a fortune restored—are Providential in the old novel's manner. The book asks for both a smile at the vicar and a serious respect for the life he defends.

KEY CHARACTERS

Dr. Charles Primrose
The vicar-narrator: pious, cheerful, sometimes gullible, and stubborn in mercy.

Deborah Primrose
His wife, fond of gentility and matches, whose worldly hopes complicate the family's trials.

Olivia and Sophia
The daughters, one harmed by a rake, the other reserved for a worthier love.

George and Moses
The sons: a soldier of honor and a bookish boy cheated at a fair.

Squire Thornhill
The charming, predatory landlord.

Mr. Burchell (Sir William Thornhill)
The squire's uncle, disguised as a poor, plain gentleman, and the book's hidden just man.

A FAMILY, AND THE TRIMMINGS OF THE VAIN

> *"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."*
>
> **Dr. Primrose** · Chapter I

> *"the nakedness of the indigent world may be cloathed from the trimmings of the vain."*
>
> Early, on dress and charity

Grades 8–12
Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01
A Fortune Lost
CHAPTERS I–V

The vicar's independent living disappears with a merchant's failure. The family go to a poorer parish under a landlord they do not yet know, carrying their cheerfulness and their weaknesses with them.

- The opening essay on a large family is the vicar's moral program.
- The journey is already a lesson in pride and simplicity.
- Mr. Burchell, plain and kind, enters as a seeming nobody.

> *"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."*
>
> **Dr. Primrose** · Chapter I

02
The New Parish, and a Squire
CHAPTERS VI–XIV

At the new vicarage they meet Squire Thornhill, a charming rake, and persist in plans of gentility—portraits, fine clothes, a neighbor's fair. Moses is cheated in the sale of a colt; the vicar, in the sale of a horse.

- The comedy of the green spectacles is a proverb of rustic cunning twice applied.
- Olivia and Sophia's education in vanity is the family's open flank.
- Burchell's advice is wiser than his coat.

03
Olivia Gone
CHAPTERS XV–XXII

Olivia is enticed away. The house burns. The vicar, searching, finds his daughter abandoned after a false marriage and will not cast her off. He is himself seized for debt and taken to prison.

- The father's reception of Olivia is the book's Christian center.
- Fire and debt arrive together, a pile of trials.
- Thornhill's ease in the world is the measure of a corrupt gentility.

04
The Prison
CHAPTERS XXIII–XXVIII

From prison the vicar still shepherds his flock, preaches to the inmates, and hears worse news of George and of Sophia. His patience looks, for a time, like defeat.

- The prison sermon is doctrine tested, not a lecture from a safe pulpit.
- Jenkinson, the old sharper, begins to turn toward help.
- The family remain a family even here.

05
Disguises Lifted
CHAPTERS XXIX–XXXII

Mr. Burchell is revealed as Sir William Thornhill. The plots against the family are unwound; the marriage is good; the living and the peace of the house are restored.

- The last unmasking is an older comic convention; Goldsmith uses it without shame.
- Providence in this book works through a just magistrate as well as through tears.
- The vicar's first opinion about a family is allowed, after trial, to stand.

Providence · Family · Mercy · Vanity · Patience in Trial

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 8–12

1. The hosted text is the original English of Project Gutenberg #2667, in thirty-two chapters.
2. The opening opinion is exact, including the comma after "opinion": "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."
3. The charity sentence in this text uses the older spelling cloathed: "the nakedness of the indigent world may be cloathed from the trimmings of the vain." Do not modernize it.
4. The plot includes an abduction and a supposed false marriage. The vicar's refusal to reject Olivia is the scene to teach; the last-chapter revelations are the old novel's way of rewarding that mercy.

Quotations are verbatim from the original English text, Project Gutenberg #2667: The Vicar of Wakefield, the public-domain text hosted at classicslaunch.org/works/the-vicar-of-wakefield/. Citations give book and chapter (or canto and line) so every line can be checked.