

## The Vicar of Wakefield – Oliver Goldsmith

### Summary of the Novel

#### Introduction:

*The Vicar of Wakefield* is a popular 18th-century Irish novel by Oliver Goldsmith. It is a complex novel of themes and characters. Considered an exemplary sentimental novel, The novel has a complicated plot that follows the misfortunes of the Primrose family.

**Short summary:** Dr. Primrose, the vicar of Wakefield, is a wealthy man who lives in a peaceful community with his family. He has two daughters, Olivia and Sophia, and his four sons, George, Bill, Moses, and Dick, and his wife, Deborah. His son George is engaged to Arabella Wilmot, but on the night of their wedding, Dr. Primrose loses all of his money after his broker declares bankruptcy. Arabella's father subsequently cancels the wedding.

George is then sent to London, and the family is forced to move to a parish on Squire Thornhill's lands. Mr. Thornhill has a reputation of being a ladies' man who is living off of his wealthy uncle, Sir William Thornhill. At first, the family has trouble fitting into the new, less fashionable region. Shortly after moving to the area, Mr. Primrose meets Mr. Burchell and Squire Thornhill.

Mr. Burchell saves Sophia from drowning, and both show attraction to one another. The vicar discourages the romance because Mr. Burchell is a poor young man. Squire Thornhill seems courteous, charming, and friendly, despite his poor reputation. Thornhill shows an interest in Olivia, which pleases Mr. Primrose. For a brief time, the family lives happily. Squire Thornhill continuously encourages the Primrose family to go after social ambitions that exceed their class status, and this leads to many embarrassments.

Eventually, Mr. Primrose discovers that Squire Thornhill has been deceiving the family. Olivia leaves with him instead of marrying the man her family chose for her, thus sacrificing her reputation. The vicar goes after her and falls ill during the trip. After a series of unfortunate events that ruin the family's reputation, Mr. Burchell saves the family from disgrace and reveals himself as the gracious Sir William Thornhill.

**Detailed Summary:** The Vicar opens his tale by describing for the reader the pleasures of rural life, the characteristics of his family, and his views on monogamy. After presenting this background material, he opens the narrative with an account of the romance between his eldest son, George Primrose, and Arabella Wilmot. The first conflict of the plot occurs when the Vicar tells Mr. Wilmot his views on monogamy and informs him of the loss of his fortune. This revelation results in the separation of George and Arabella, Georges is being sent to the city, and the migration of the family is from Wakefield to the estate of Squire Thornhill. At an inn on the route of their journey, the family meets Mr. Burchell, who relates the reforming of Sir William Thornhill and who later rescues Sophia, the Vicar's younger daughter, from a rapid stream.

Soon after they establish themselves in their new home, the Primroses are honored with a visit from Squire Thornhill, their young landlord. Following the Squire's departure, Burchell stops at the Primrose home and is offered a bed for the night. Refusing the offer, Burchell leaves, and the family is free to discuss the latter's merits. A second call from the Squire follows the next day, during which the Squire attempts to be witty on the subject of the Church, successfully debates the same subject with Moses, the second son, and arouses the ambition of Mrs. Primrose by his attention to Olivia, her older daughter.

The ensuing morning Burchell joins the family for lunch, during which he comments on pathos in contemporary literature. The arrival of the chaplain, announcing the Squire's ball, interrupts the peaceful meal. At the ball Lady Blarney and Miss Skeggs, two ladies of distinction,

encourage Olivia and Sophia to visit London, but the Vicar, suspicious, refuses to approve the plan. A fortune-teller's prediction that Olivia shall marry a Squire and Sophia, a Lord raises the genteel ambitions of Olivia and Sophia even higher. However, the futile attempts of Mrs. Primrose and the children to ride the horses to church on a Sunday morning have a somewhat humbling effect on the family. The Michaelmas Eve celebration of the next day presents a second opportunity for the Primrose family to associate with Lady Blarney and Miss Skeggs. As a result of this encounter, Mrs. Primrose suggests that the colt be sold immediately to buy a horse.

Moses is sent to the fair for this purpose but returns, not with a horse, but with green spectacles. When Burchell expresses disapproval of the girls' visit to town, Mrs. Primrose expels him from the house. The Vicar, now approving the proposed London trip for his daughters, resolves to sell the remaining horse himself, but he, like Moses, returns home without horse or money. At home he finds more misfortune, for a malicious letter from Burchell to Lady Blarney and Miss Skeggs, a copy of which the family find the next morning, has cancelled his daughters' intended excursion. Burchell, appearing on the morrow, reluctantly confesses his guilt. After expelling the alleged scoundrel, the Vicar sermonizes on Guilt and Shame.

The attention of the family is now focused on persuading the Squire to marry Olivia. A family portrait falls short of being a successful undertaking, since the neighbors ridicule its enormous size and envy the Squire's being portrayed therein. Even the suggestion that Olivia may marry

Farmer Williams appears only questionably successful in arousing the Squire's interest. Olivia promises to marry Williams if the Squire fails to propose by a specified date. The family seems content with the prospects of her marriage to Williams but is aroused from complacency by the announcement that Olivia has been taken away by a stranger fitting the Squire's description. The Vicar, determined to find her, goes to the estate of the Squire, who leads him to believe that Burchell has taken her away. At Wells, where Olivia was reported to be seen, the Vicar falls ill but after three weeks is able to return home. He meets a company of strolling players, with one of whom he is invited to the home of a gentleman. Reaching the gentleman's home, he is led into a discussion on "modern politics," which is soon interrupted by the arrival of Mr. and Mrs. Arnold, owners of the house, and their niece Arabella Wilmot.

Following dinner the next night, the Vicar accompanies the ladies of the Arnold household to the theater, where he finds George, his eldest son, to be a sensational new player. Brought to the Arnolds' home, George, after much persuasion, gives an account of his travels. The arrival of the Squire in town proves to be an obstacle to the renewal of the relationship between George and Arabella. The Squire successfully disposes of his rival by securing a commission to the West Indies for George. The Vicar, continuing his journey home, finds Olivia at an inn, impoverished and abandoned. Leaving her at another inn, he approaches home only to find his house ablaze. After he has comforted his family, the Vicar sends for Olivia, who is welcomed sarcastically by her mother.

Since Olivia seems depressed, the Vicar tells the story of Matilda and resolves to prevent the Squire's marriage to Arabella. In the midst of breakfast the following morning, Squire Thornhill arrives only to be confronted with the Vicar's condemnation. The Squire's proposal to marry Olivia to another arouses the father's insolence, whereupon the Squire warns that the Vicar may be compelled to pay his rent or suffer the consequences of not paying. The next day Squire Thornhill's steward calls for the rent; in default of payment, the steward brings officers to arrest the debtor.

Willingly, the Vicar goes to jail, where in a conversation with a fellow prisoner, he discovers the man to be Jenkinson, his deceiver at the fair. After the Vicar preaches to the other prisoners on the folly of serving the devil, he invites Jenkinson to partake of the supper which the family had brought. The next day he presents a plan for reforming the prisoners and preaches against the penal code. Jenkinson advises approval of the approaching marriage of Squire

Thornhill, and upon the news of Olivia's death, the Vicar finally acquiesces. The kidnapping of Sophia and a letter from George which brings hope for a change of fortune are followed by the disheartening appearance of George himself in fetters. To comfort his son, the Vicar preaches on the subject of religion versus philosophy. Upon finishing his sermon, the Vicar is told of Sophia's arrival with Burchell. Slowly Burchell reveals his true identity: Sir William Thornhill. He then secures permission for Jenkinson to produce Sophia's kidnapper. At that moment Squire Thornhill arrives to defend himself.

His defense is successful until Jenkinson returns with Baxter, Sophia's kidnapper, and exposes the Squire's part in the kidnapping. Miss Wilmot appears now and is reunited with George. When the Squire threatens to hold Arabella's fortune, Jenkinson produces Olivia, alive, as the Squire's lawful wife. Sir William Thornhill assigns a punishment for his nephew and proposes marriage to Sophia. The double wedding and the gathering of the family around the fireside conclude the narrative.