The Vicar of Wakefield

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CHAPTER I

In Chapter I, the narrator Dr. Primrose, a country vicar, introduces himself and his family to the reader. He begins by saying that he always believed a man who marries and raises a large family does more good for society than a man who stays single and just talks about having children, and this belief motivated him to marry early in his life. He chose his wife very carefully, not for her looks or glamour but for her practical and lasting qualities, just like choosing a wedding gown for its durability rather than its shine. His wife was a kind, hardworking, and capable woman who was excellent at cooking, pickling, preserving food, and managing the household, though despite all her careful management the family never seemed to get any richer, which the Vicar mentions with gentle amusement. They loved each other deeply and their affection only grew stronger as they aged, living a peaceful and comfortable life in a beautiful house in a pleasant neighbourhood, spending their time visiting rich neighbours, helping the poor, and enjoying simple domestic pleasures, with their greatest adventures being nothing more dramatic than moving from one bedroom to another. They were well known for their hospitality, especially for their gooseberry wine which every visitor praised, and they welcomed distant relatives of all kinds, even the blind, the lame, and the disreputable, because Mrs. Primrose believed that family should always be treated equally, though the Vicar had a clever trick of lending unwanted troublesome relatives a coat, boots, or a horse of small value when they left, knowing they would never return to give it back. The Vicar then describes his six children, starting with George the eldest who was educated at Oxford and intended for a learned profession, followed by Olivia aged eighteen who was strikingly and boldly beautiful like the goddess Hebe, open, lively, and attention-seeking, always wanting many admirers, then Sophia who was quietly and softly beautiful, modest and sensible, preferring to secure the love of one person rather than dazzle many, then Moses educated at home for business, and finally two younger sons born twelve years after Moses. The Vicar proudly compares himself to Count Abensberg who presented his thirty-two children to a king as his greatest treasure, and he considers his six children a gift to the nation. He concludes the chapter by noting that although the children had individual differences, they all shared one fundamental character — they were all equally generous, trusting, simple, and harmless — which sounds like a compliment but is actually Goldsmith's quiet warning to the reader that this family is dangerously innocent and will be easily deceived by the cruel world they are about to enter.

CHAPTER II

In Chapter II, the Vicar explains that while his wife managed all the household and financial matters, he focused entirely on his religious duties, giving away his entire clerical salary of thirty-five pounds a year to the widows and orphans of clergy because he had a

private fortune of fourteen thousand pounds and felt no need for the money himself. He was known throughout the parish as a humble and dedicated vicar without pride, and he made it his personal mission to encourage married men toward temperance and unmarried men toward matrimony, becoming so associated with marriage that people joked about three unusual things in Wakefield — a vicar without pride, young men without wives, and alehouses without customers. The Vicar had one particular obsession however, which was his strong belief in strict monogamy, meaning he believed a clergyman should never remarry after his wife's death, a position he shared with a theologian named Whiston, and he was so passionate about this belief that he wrote tracts defending it which nobody bought, and he even wrote an epitaph praising his wife's virtues and had it framed and hung over the fireplace while she was still very much alive, which he thought served the useful purposes of reminding her of her duties and inspiring her to live up to the praise. It was probably because the Vicar talked about marriage so constantly that his eldest son George fell in love with Miss Arabella Wilmot, the beautiful, innocent, and wealthy daughter of a neighbouring clergyman named Mr. Wilmot, and since the Vicar could offer a good financial settlement, Mr. Wilmot happily agreed to the match, and both families spent several happy months together enjoying music, hunting, dancing, and pleasant courtship activities while preparations for the wedding slowly moved forward. However, disaster struck in two forms almost simultaneously — first, the Vicar unwisely showed his new monogamy tract to Mr. Wilmot, not knowing that Mr. Wilmot was himself at that very time courting a fourth wife and therefore violently opposed to the Vicar's argument, causing a furious theological argument that threatened to break apart the families, and second, a relative pulled the Vicar aside during the heat of this argument to tell him that the merchant in London who held the family's entire fortune had gone bankrupt and fled, leaving them with almost nothing. The relative wisely urged the Vicar to hide this financial ruin until after the wedding so that George could still secure Arabella's fortune, but the Vicar, a man of rigid and uncompromising honesty, absolutely refused to deceive anyone and immediately went and announced the loss to everyone present, the result being that Mr. Wilmot, who had already been looking for a reason to withdraw from the match, promptly broke off the engagement, leaving George heartbroken and the family both penniless and robbed of the alliance that might have saved them, with Goldsmith wryly noting that Mr. Wilmot had one virtue in perfection — prudence — which is "too often the only one that is left us at seventy-two."

CHAPTER III

In Chapter III, the Vicar's last hope that the reports of financial ruin were exaggerated is crushed by a confirming letter from his London agent, and after letting his grieving family mourn for two weeks without interference because he wisely understood that offering comfort too soon only reminds people of their pain, he gathers himself and makes practical plans for the future, accepting a small church position called a curacy worth only fifteen pounds a year in a distant parish, planning to supplement this by farming the land himself. After settling all debts, the family finds that from their original fourteen thousand pounds only four hundred remains, and the Vicar delivers a calm and dignified speech to his children urging them to let go of all pretensions to gentility, accept their humble new circumstances without bitterness, and find happiness in simplicity rather than wealth. George, the eldest son, is sent to London on foot to make his own way in the world, and the Vicar's farewell to him is deeply moving — he gives George five guineas, a staff, and a book, comparing him to the great scholar Hooker who walked to London before him, and quoting scripture to comfort him, and though the parting brings tears to

the whole family, the Vicar is confident in George's character. The rest of the family then makes their own seventy-mile journey, which feels enormous to people who have never traveled more than ten miles from home, and on the first night they stop at an inn where the landlord tells them about their new landlord Squire Thornhill, describing him as a charming but dangerous man who pursues and seduces every young woman in the neighbourhood without exception, which alarms the Vicar but excites his wife and daughters who foolishly see the Squire as a challenge they can conquer rather than a threat to avoid. That same evening they encounter a mysterious stranger at the inn named Mr. Burchell, a gentleman of about thirty dressed in worn clothes, who has no money to pay his bill because he spent all he had paying a fine to save an old soldier from being publicly whipped, and the Vicar generously lends him money, drawn by his charitable nature. The next morning Mr. Burchell travels with the family, walking alongside them despite being a gentleman, engaging the Vicar in philosophical conversation, and at one point telling a detailed story about the famous Sir William Thornhill — the Squire's uncle — explaining how Sir William was once so overwhelmingly generous that he nearly ruined himself by giving to every person who asked, attracted only flatterers and parasites, lost both his fortune and his self-respect, but eventually reformed himself, traveled Europe on foot to rebuild his character and finances, and now lives wisely and moderately while still maintaining an eccentric and generous nature. Crucially, during this story Burchell accidentally slips from "he" into "I" — saying "I now found that—" before quickly correcting himself — which is Goldsmith's brilliant hint to the attentive reader that Mr. Burchell himself IS Sir William Thornhill travelling in disguise, though the Vicar completely fails to notice this. The journey reaches its most dramatic moment when Sophia is thrown from her horse into a fast-flowing flooded stream and nearly drowns, and Burchell immediately jumps into the water and saves her life at great personal risk, an act of genuine heroism that earns Sophia's deep and clearly romantic gratitude, as she leans on his arm afterward and thanks him more with her eyes than with words. The chapter ends lightly and ironically as Mrs. Primrose tells her husband that she likes Burchell very much and would happily approve of him as a match for their daughters — but only if he had the right birth and fortune to be worthy of "such a family as ours" — a wonderfully absurd statement from a woman who is now nearly penniless, and the Vicar smiles at her snobbery while gently forgiving it as one of those harmless delusions that make people happy.

CHAPTER IV

In Chapter IV, the Vicar describes the simple and peaceful neighbourhood where the family has settled, a small community of hardworking farmers who own and work their own land, who are neither rich nor poor, and who have almost everything they need within their own community without needing to travel to towns or cities for luxuries. These people are naturally simple, honest, and cheerful, still following old traditional customs like singing Christmas carols, sending love tokens on Valentine's Day, eating pancakes on Shrove Tuesday, playing April Fool's jokes, and cracking nuts on Michaelmas Eve, and when the Primrose family arrives the whole neighbourhood comes out dressed in their best clothes with music playing to welcome their new minister, and a welcoming feast is prepared where what the conversation lacked in cleverness it more than made up for in laughter and warmth. The Vicar then lovingly describes their tiny new home, a single-storey thatched cottage at the foot of a gentle hill with a stream in front, a meadow on one side and a green on the other, with about twenty acres of good farming land attached to it, and though it was small and humble with just one main room serving as both parlour and kitchen, the daughters decorated the white-washed walls with their own drawings and kept everything so clean and neatly arranged that the home felt cheerful and welcoming rather than poor. The Vicar

describes the family's daily routine with great contentment — rising at sunrise, gathering together to pray, the sons and father working the farm while the wife and daughters prepared breakfast, meals taken with laughter and philosophical conversation, evenings spent at home by the fire with neighbours like the talkative Farmer Flamborough and a blind piper visiting to drink gooseberry wine, sing ballads, and tell stories, and nights closing with the younger boys reading the day's scripture lessons, with a halfpenny reward on Sunday for whoever read loudest and clearest to be given to the poor box. However, even in this humble contentment, vanity has not left the family — on the first Sunday the Vicar discovers that despite all his lectures against pride, his wife and daughters have dressed themselves in their finest old clothes with elaborate hairstyles and patches on their faces to go to church, and the Vicar handles this brilliantly by ordering their coach in a completely deadpan manner, knowing full well they no longer have one, and when his wife protests that they can walk, he calmly tells her that if they walk to church dressed like that the village children will mock them in the street. After a firm but gentle speech about how frippery and finery are unbecoming to people in their circumstances, and how the money spent on such decorations could clothe the poor, the daughters willingly go and change their clothes, and the next day — in what is a genuinely touching moment — the Vicar finds his daughters have voluntarily cut up their elaborate train-dresses to make simple Sunday waistcoats for their little brothers Dick and Bill, and he notes with satisfaction that the gowns actually looked better for being simplified, which is Goldsmith's gentle point that dignity and simplicity are more beautiful than vanity and excess.

CHAPTER V

In Chapter V, the Vicar describes another simple pleasure the family has found in their new life — a garden seat shaded by hawthorn and honeysuckle where they sit together in the calm of the evening to enjoy the countryside, drink tea (now a rare treat that is prepared with great ceremony and excitement), listen to the children read, and watch the girls play music on their guitars while the Vicar and his wife stroll through fields of bluebells talking happily about their children, and the Vicar reflects that every situation in life, however humble, can bring its own particular pleasures. This pleasant scene is suddenly interrupted one autumn holiday when a stag comes bounding past followed by a pack of hunting dogs and horsemen, and while the Vicar wants to take his family inside immediately, his wife and daughters are too curious and excited to move. Most of the hunters rush past, but one young man of noticeably genteel and superior appearance stops, hands his horse to a servant, and approaches the family with a casual and confident air as if he already knows he will be welcomed — this is Squire Thornhill, their landlord, meeting them for the first time. He tries immediately to greet the daughters with a familiar kiss but the girls rebuff him properly the first time, though when he tries again the power of his fine clothes and handsome appearance proves too much and they allow it, and soon the family is drawn into easy conversation with him. The Vicar quietly winks at his daughters to discourage singing for the Squire, but Mrs. Primrose immediately contradicts this hint with her own encouraging nod, so the girls sing for him, he plays the guitar rather badly, and the eldest daughter Olivia praises his playing extravagantly. The family falls over themselves trying to entertain him — the girls discuss fashionable topics, Moses tries to impress him with classical quotations and gets laughed at for it, and even the little children crowd around him touching his expensive lace clothes with their dirty fingers. The Vicar is clearly uncomfortable and disapproving throughout, and when Thornhill leaves and sends a generous gift of venison the next day, the family holds an informal council to discuss the visit. Mrs. Primrose is thrilled and sees Thornhill as a possible wealthy match for one of the girls, while Sophia says with quiet intelligence that he seems to have a lot to say about

everything especially on trivial subjects — which the Vicar correctly interprets as concealed contempt — while Olivia says she doesn't much like him and finds him impudent, which the Vicar correctly interprets as secret admiration. The Vicar then delivers a serious and sensible warning to his family, saying that friendships between people of unequal rank always end in contempt, that fortune-hunting is despicable in men and women alike, and that he fears Thornhill's character deeply, but his warning is immediately undermined by the arrival of the venison gift which wins over the family completely, and so the Vicar falls silent, satisfied with having at least pointed out the danger, and adds the quietly wise but dangerously passive line — "that virtue which requires to be ever guarded is scarce worth the sentinel" — meaning he thinks his daughters' virtue is strong enough to look after itself, which will prove to be a serious misjudgment where Olivia is concerned.

CHAPTER VI

In Chapter VI, the family decides to cook part of Thornhill's venison for supper, and as they sit down the Vicar remarks that a feast like this needs a guest to be truly enjoyable, and almost immediately Mrs. Primrose spots Mr. Burchell coming down the road and welcomes him warmly as the man who saved Sophia's life. Burchell joins them for supper and the evening is spent in simple pleasure — he sings old songs, tells the children stories including Patient Grissel, Fair Rosamond, and other folk tales, and is so warmly received that when it gets late and there is no spare bed for him, the children immediately and spontaneously offer to share their beds with him, which prompts the Vicar to give a touching little speech about hospitality being a fundamental Christian duty. The next morning Burchell helps the family with their haymaking and the Vicar notes with mild but significant concern that Burchell pays particularly close attention to Sophia during the work, helping her with her share and spending a great deal of time in private conversation with her, though the Vicar reassures himself that Sophia is too sensible and too ambitious to be interested in a man of broken fortune, which is both a fair observation and a slightly snobbish one. When Burchell leaves, the Vicar delivers what he thinks is a wise moral speech about Burchell's life, saying he is a clear example of the misery that comes from a youth of foolishness and extravagance, and that his intelligence only makes his downfall more pitiable, but Sophia gently and wisely reproves her father for kicking a man when he is already down, quoting the Vicar's own previous teachings about not striking unnecessarily at someone already being punished by Providence, which shows Sophia's genuine moral intelligence and also causes her to blush deeply when Moses points out how cheerful Burchell was when talking specifically to her — a blush she quickly tries to cover up with a laugh, but which the Vicar notices and privately worries about even as he suppresses his suspicions. The chapter ends on a note of comic domestic drama — the Vicar discovers his daughters secretly preparing a beauty face-wash over the fire in preparation for Thornhill's upcoming visit, and since he has always hated such cosmetic concoctions as damaging to the complexion, he casually drifts his chair toward the fire and with great pretended innocence overturns the whole pot with the poker, destroying it before they can finish it, which is a charming scene that balances the more serious undercurrents of attraction to both Burchell and Thornhill that are beginning to develop in the household.

CHAPTER VII

Squire Thornhill arrives for his promised dinner visit accompanied by a small group that includes his chaplain, his personal attendant called a feeder, and several servants whom he politely suggests should wait at the nearby alehouse, though Mrs. Primrose in a burst of proud hospitality insists on entertaining everyone including the servants, a generosity the Vicar drily notes left the family financially pinched for three weeks afterward. Before the visit Burchell had mentioned that Thornhill was reportedly making marriage proposals to Miss Arabella Wilmot, which is George's former fiancée and therefore a painful topic, but this awkwardness is dissolved when Thornhill casually insults Miss Wilmot's looks with a crude joke comparing her to a lamp-post, and everyone laughs because as the Vicar notes with dry irony "the jests of the rich are ever successful." The dinner conversation reveals Thornhill's character more clearly — he is witty on the surface but shallow underneath, he mocks religion casually saying a fine girl is worth more than all religion put together, and he draws poor Moses into a fake philosophical debate by using a string of impressive-sounding but completely meaningless philosophical jargon — words like "concatenation of self-existences" and "reciprocal duplicate ratio" — until Moses is completely confused and humiliated, reduced to the only silent and miserable face in a room full of laughter, while the Vicar notes that it was nothing more than an act of memory rather than real intelligence. Olivia however mistakes all of this for genuine wit and is clearly dazzled by Thornhill, which the Vicar understands but does not excuse, attributing it to the dangerous combination of a handsome face, expensive clothes, and a large fortune. After Thornhill leaves, Mrs. Primrose cheerfully confesses that she had been deliberately encouraging the girls to welcome Thornhill's attentions all along because she hopes it might lead to a wealthy marriage, and the Vicar expresses his strong disapproval, saying he would far rather have a poor honest man for a son-in-law than a rich freethinker, because a man who openly mocks religion cannot be trusted. Moses defends Thornhill by arguing that a man cannot be blamed for his private thoughts only for his actions, to which the Vicar responds sharply that a man who actively embraces wrong beliefs rather than simply being ignorant of the truth is guilty of moral negligence and deserves either punishment or contempt. Mrs. Primrose tries to smooth things over by suggesting optimistically that sensible women can reform freethinker husbands and that Olivia could easily do the same, claiming Olivia is well versed in religious controversy, and when the Vicar skeptically asks what controversy she has actually read, Olivia lists — with complete seriousness — the debates between fictional characters from novels including Tom Jones and Robinson Crusoe, which is one of the most perfectly comic moments in the novel, and the Vicar dismisses her with fond sarcasm by telling her she is clearly perfectly qualified to make converts and should go help her mother with the gooseberry pie, which is Goldsmith's way of showing that Olivia's supposed religious learning is completely worthless and that she is dangerously unprepared for the real moral dangers that Thornhill represents.

CHAPTER VIII

In Chapter VIII, Mr. Burchell visits the family again the next morning, and while the Vicar is beginning to feel mildly uneasy about how frequently Burchell comes, he cannot bring himself to turn away a man who works so hard during his visits, helping enthusiastically with the haymaking and always being the first to take on the heaviest tasks. The Vicar genuinely enjoys Burchell's company, finding him funny, sensible, and oddly admirable all at once, though his one real concern is the growing attachment Burchell is showing toward Sophia — calling her his "little mistress" in a joking way, buying her the finest set of ribbons when he buys gifts for all the girls, and seeming to become more impressive and wise with every passing day. The family dines together out in the field on a cloth spread

over the hay, in one of the most beautifully peaceful scenes in the novel, with blackbirds singing from opposite hedges and a robin eating crumbs from their hands, and the conversation turns to poetry and literature, with Sophia quoting Gay, Moses quoting Ovid, and Burchell making a sharp critical observation that both poets contributed to a false poetic taste by loading their lines with too many descriptive epithets rather than focusing on plot and meaning, using this criticism as a clever excuse to introduce a ballad of his own which he claims is free from these faults. The ballad, called "Edwin and Angelina" or "The Hermit," is a romantic and melancholy story in verse about a young woman named Angelina who disguises herself as a male pilgrim and wanders through the wilderness seeking a lover named Edwin whom she drove away with her proud coquettish behaviour until he disappeared into solitude and apparently died of a broken heart. She arrives at a hermit's cell seeking shelter and rest, and the hermit tries to comfort her by telling her that love and friendship are empty and meaningless, but when he sees her blush at the mention of love he realises she is actually a young woman in disguise, and in a wonderful romantic twist the hermit reveals himself to be Edwin himself — not dead at all but living as a hermit — and the two lovers are joyfully reunited. This ballad is deeply significant because it mirrors the situation of Sophia and Burchell perfectly — Sophia is quietly attracted to a man who appears poor and broken but is actually a gentleman of great worth, and the ballad's message that wisdom and genuine worth matter more than wealth or rank is exactly the argument in favour of Burchell over the wealthy but corrupt Squire Thornhill. Sophia listens with visible tenderness and emotion that she cannot quite hide. The peaceful scene is then suddenly shattered when the Squire's chaplain bursts through the hedge having shot one of the singing blackbirds, and the sudden noise frightens Sophia so much that she instinctively throws herself into Burchell's arms for protection — a small but telling moment of physical closeness between them. The chaplain apologises for the disturbance and sits down beside Sophia, offering her the dead bird as a sportsman's gift, which she initially refuses until a private look from her mother makes her accept it, and Mrs. Primrose whispers proudly that Sophia has now made a conquest of the chaplain just as Olivia has made one of the Squire. The Vicar privately suspects with far more accuracy that Sophia's real affections lie elsewhere entirely. The chaplain then delivers his actual message — that Squire Thornhill is organising a moonlight ball on the grass outside their cottage that very evening with music and refreshments — and he asks for the honour of Sophia's hand as his dancing partner, to which Sophia graciously agrees but not before generously suggesting that Burchell should also be included in the evening's entertainment since he has been their companion all day, showing her thoughtfulness and loyalty. Burchell however declines the invitation saying he has been invited to a harvest supper five miles away, and the Vicar reflects with a mixture of puzzlement and gentle snobbery that he cannot quite understand how a sensible girl like Sophia could prefer the company of a man of broken fortune to that of the chaplain with his far better prospects, before immediately correcting himself with the wise observation that women are often the better judges of men's true character, just as men are better judges of women's worth.

CHAPTER IX

In Chapter IX, almost immediately after Burchell leaves and Sophia agrees to dance with the chaplain, Squire Thornhill arrives with a larger and grander company than before — two well-dressed gentlemen and two young ladies from town whom Thornhill introduces as women of very great distinction and high fashion. The Vicar's cottage is too small for everyone and there are not enough chairs, and Thornhill immediately suggests with

characteristic impudence that each gentleman should sit in a lady's lap, which the Vicar firmly refuses despite a disapproving look from his wife, and Moses is sent to borrow extra chairs while the gentlemen fetch two of the Flamborough daughters from next door to make up the numbers for dancing. The moonlit ball proceeds cheerfully — Thornhill dances with Olivia and she moves with such grace and energy that Mrs. Primrose cannot resist boasting that all her daughter's steps were actually copied from herself, while the two fashionable ladies from town try hard to match Olivia's natural elegance but succeed only in swimming, sprawling, and flailing about in a way that the watching neighbours describe as fine because they dare not say otherwise. One of the fine ladies betrays her true lack of refinement by saying loudly that "by the living jingo she was all of a muck of sweat," which the Vicar notes with dry irony he took as a sure sign of her distinction, before adding that he has since learned swearing is actually completely unfashionable. After the dancing, Thornhill provides a cold supper and the conversation turns to high society topics — art, taste, Shakespeare, and musical glasses — all delivered with great authority by the two town ladies who also let slip several oaths which the family politely overlooks, dazzled by their expensive clothes and confident manner. The two ladies then make comments that flatter and tempt Mrs. Primrose enormously, saying that a season in London would greatly improve Olivia and transform Sophia completely, and Mrs. Primrose eagerly agrees that a winter's polishing in town is her greatest wish for her daughters, to which the Vicar responds sensibly that their breeding is already better than their fortune can support and that greater refinement would only make their poverty more painfully obvious and give them appetites for pleasures they cannot afford. Thornhill then makes what sounds like a grand romantic speech about how his fortune is large and Olivia deserves every pleasure, and that he would happily settle half his estate on her if it gave her pleasure — but the Vicar recognises this immediately for exactly what it is, the standard fashionable language used to dress up a dishonourable seductive proposal, and he responds firmly and with dignified anger that his family has as fine a sense of honour as anyone and that honour is now their only possession which they will guard carefully. Thornhill shakes the Vicar's hand and swears he meant nothing dishonourable, adding with a careless laugh that his style of romantic pursuit is by sudden assault rather than formal siege — which is not exactly the reassurance the Vicar was hoping for. The evening then takes a surprisingly moral turn as the two town ladies, putting on a show of virtue, lead a serious conversation about temperance and goodness which draws in the Vicar, his wife, and the chaplain, and even brings Thornhill himself to confess regret for his past excesses, and the Vicar is so pleased by this apparent reformation that he keeps his children up late to benefit from the improving conversation, and Thornhill even suggests they end the evening with prayers which the Vicar joyfully agrees to. As the company prepares to leave the two ladies ask warmly if Olivia and Sophia could come home with them for a visit, the Squire supports the idea enthusiastically, Mrs. Primrose urges the girls to go, and the girls themselves look pleadingly at their father, but the Vicar firmly and repeatedly refuses to let them go, a decision that earns him sullen looks and short answers from his wife and daughters for the entire next day, though he is absolutely right to refuse since the company is clearly dangerous and the invitation highly suspicious.

CHAPTER X

In Chapter X, the Vicar observes with resignation that all his patient teachings about simplicity, contentment, and humility have been completely undone by the brief visit of the two fashionable town ladies. The windows are once again filled with beauty lotions and face washes, the daughters are protected from sunlight and firelight as threats to their

complexions, Mrs. Primrose declares that rising early damages the eyes and working after dinner reddens the nose and that the hands look whitest when doing nothing at all, and instead of doing useful work like finishing George's shirts the girls spend their time remodelling old dresses and doing decorative embroidery. The honest Flamborough girls who were the family's companions are cast off as too common, and all conversation is full of talk about high life, fashionable society, Shakespeare, pictures, and musical glasses — all borrowed wholesale from the two town ladies. The situation reaches a new peak of absurdity when a fortune-telling gypsy appears in the neighbourhood and the girls beg their father for a shilling each to have their fortunes told, and the Vicar, tired of always being the voice of wisdom and wanting simply to see his daughters happy, gives in and provides the money. The gypsy tells Olivia she will marry a Squire within the year and tells Sophia she will have a Lord shortly after her sister's wedding, and the Vicar responds to this with perfect deadpan sarcasm, telling them he could have promised them a Prince and a Nabob for half the price. But the damage is done — the whole family now believes itself destined for greatness, the parish already whispers that the Squire is in love with Olivia, and Olivia herself genuinely falls for him largely because everyone around her insists that she should, which is Goldsmith's sharp observation about how social pressure and wishful thinking can manufacture emotions that feel completely real. Mrs. Primrose begins having omen-filled dreams every morning which she recounts with great solemnity — a coffin meaning a wedding is coming, pockets filled with farthings meaning they will soon be filled with gold — and the girls experience their own romantic signs in candle rings, bouncing purses from the fire, and love-knots in the bottom of teacups. Toward the end of the week the two town ladies send a card inviting the whole family to church the following Sunday, and the Vicar immediately senses from the whispered conferences between his wife and daughters and the meaningful glances directed at him that a plan is being hatched for some kind of extravagant display. Sure enough, that evening Mrs. Primrose opens what the Vicar describes as a siege — beginning gently with conversation about how they ought to appear decently at church, then gradually working toward her real point, which is that they should ride to church on the two plough horses rather than walk, so as not to arrive red-faced and dishevelled. The Vicar raises every possible objection — walking is far more dignified, one horse is wall-eyed, the other has no tail, neither has been properly trained to ride, and they only have one saddle and pillion between them — but every objection is overruled and he is forced to comply. On Sunday morning the Vicar walks ahead to church while the family prepares the horses, and after waiting nearly an hour in the reading desk for them to arrive he gives up and conducts the service without them, then walks home the long way round only to meet the entire family still slowly making their way toward the church — his wife, son, and two little ones crammed onto one horse and his two daughters on the other, all of them having suffered a complete catalogue of disasters on the road including the horses refusing to move at all until Burchell appeared and beat them forward with his walking stick, the pillion strap breaking and needing repairs, and one of the horses simply stopping and refusing to go any further no matter what anyone did. The Vicar pretends to be concerned but privately admits he is not entirely displeased by their humiliation, since the experience will give him many future opportunities to point out the foolishness of pretending to a style of life beyond their means, and he hopes it might teach his daughters a little genuine humility — though given everything we have seen of this family, the reader suspects it probably will not.

CHAPTER XI

In Chapter XI, on Michaelmas Eve, the family is invited to celebrate at neighbour Flamborough's house, and since their recent humiliation with the horses has taken some

of the edge off their pride, they actually accept the invitation and allow themselves to enjoy simple pleasures again, eating goose and dumplings and drinking lamb's-wool (a warm spiced apple drink) that even the critical Mrs. Primrose admits is excellent, and patiently listening once more to Flamborough's long, dull stories about himself that they have already heard and laughed at ten times before. Mr. Burchell joins the party and organises the children into games of blind man's buff, then hot cockles, then questions and commands, and finally hunt the slipper — a rough country game where everyone sits in a circle on the ground passing a shoe secretly under their legs while one person in the middle tries to catch it, and the real fun comes from smacking the person in the middle with the shoe heel when they are looking the other direction. Just at the worst possible moment, while Olivia is the one standing in the middle being thumped and spun about, her face red, her hair wild, and her voice screaming for fair play loud enough to deafen a street singer, the door opens and in walk the two grand ladies from town — Lady Blarney and Miss Carolina Wilhelmina Amelia Skeggs — catching the entire family in the most undignified and vulgar position imaginable. The family is frozen with mortification and shame, and Olivia quickly and cleverly covers up the previous Sunday's horse disaster by simply saying they were "thrown from their horses," to which the two ladies respond with a perfectly choreographed performance of fashionable sympathy, being greatly concerned, then extremely glad, then vastly sorry, then extremely glad again in a mechanical back-and-forth that Goldsmith presents with wonderful comic precision. The two ladies flatter the girls shamelessly, Lady Blarney attaching herself to Olivia and Miss Skeggs to Sophia, and then launch into a conversation about high society that is meant to impress but is actually completely empty and absurd — consisting of meaningless gossip about Lords and Duchesses and a Lord Duke who cried out three times for his garters — while Burchell sits with his back to them facing the fire and punctuates every single sentence with the word "Fudge!" which is his way of calling out their talk as complete nonsense. The conversation eventually turns to the two ladies mentioning that they each need a young lady companion — Lady Blarney offering thirty pounds a year and Miss Skeggs twenty-five guineas — and Mrs. Primrose's ears immediately prick up as she calculates that this comes to fifty-six pounds five shillings total, and she launches into a proud speech listing all her daughters' accomplishments including reading, writing, needlework, music, paper cutting, and even fortune-telling with cards, to which Burchell again says "Fudge!" The ladies respond cautiously, saying they would need Squire Thornhill's recommendation before making any commitment, and with this the family's new scheme is set in motion — though Goldsmith has made it perfectly clear through the ladies' ridiculous names (Blarney meaning flattery and lies, Skeggs suggesting something fraudulent), their coarse swearing, and Burchell's repeated "Fudge" that these women are not at all what they pretend to be, and that the whole scheme is built on deception that the family is too vain and too eager to see through.

CHAPTER XII

In Chapter XII, the family returns home buzzing with excitement about the prospect of the girls going to London as companions to the two fine ladies, and Mrs. Primrose spends the entire evening and even continues in bed scheming and calculating the advantages, imagining how the girls will meet men of quality in London and make brilliant marriages, and when the Vicar responds with only a cautious "pretty well" she scolds him for not being more enthusiastic. The Vicar makes one of his characteristically hedging remarks — "heaven grant they may be both the better for it this day three months" — which he privately admits is a deliberately ambiguous statement designed to make him look wise

regardless of the outcome, since if things go well it sounds like a prayer answered and if they go badly it sounds like a prophecy fulfilled, showing that the Vicar is not above his own small vanities and self-protective calculations. Mrs. Primrose then pushes her next scheme — that they should sell the old horse called the Colt at the neighbouring fair and buy a more impressive horse for making better appearances at church and on visits, and though the Vicar initially resists, he is worn down and gives in as usual. On the morning of the fair, Mrs. Primrose persuades the Vicar that he has a cold and should stay home, insisting that their son Moses is perfectly capable of handling the sale since he is supposedly a shrewd haggler who always gets the best deals. Moses is dressed up proudly by his sisters in a coat of "thunder and lightning" cloth with a gosling-green waistcoat and a broad black ribbon in his hair, and he rides off on the Colt with a deal box strapped to his back for bringing home groceries, followed by the whole family calling out good luck after him. While Moses is away, the butler from Thornhill's house arrives to say the Squire has been speaking warmly of the family, and then a footman brings a card from the two ladies saying they are nearly ready to take on the girls after receiving positive reports from Thornhill. Mrs. Primrose is overjoyed and gives the footman seven-pence halfpenny as a tip, delighted that the family is finally gaining entry to high society. Mr. Burchell then arrives from the fair bringing gingerbread for the little ones and gift boxes for the girls, but when he reads the note from the two ladies he shakes his head and warns that such matters require the utmost caution and care, which immediately angers Mrs. Primrose who snaps at him that he always opposes anything good for her daughters and that they will seek advice from people who have actually made something of their own lives. Just as the argument is building, Moses appears on the horizon walking home on foot carrying the heavy deal box on his back — with no horse. In a scene of devastating comic perfection, Moses explains that he sold the Colt for three pounds five shillings and twopence, and the family is briefly hopeful, but then he reveals he brought back no money because he spent every penny on what he believed was an incredible bargain — a gross (144 pairs) of green spectacles with silver rims and shagreen cases — which he proudly pulls from his coat. Mrs. Primrose is horrified, and the situation gets even worse when the Vicar examines the spectacles and discovers that the rims are not silver at all but merely copper varnished over, meaning Moses has been completely cheated by a con man who spotted him as an easy target. Moses then describes how the swindle worked — a reverend-looking man led him to a tent where another well-dressed man offered the spectacles at what seemed like a third of their value, and Moses's supposed "friend" whispered encouragement to buy, and even Farmer Flamborough was drawn in and persuaded to split the purchase, both of them buying a gross each — a classic confidence trick involving fake goods and a fake friendly accomplice that exploited Moses's inexperience and credulity perfectly, and which the Vicar tries to soften with the gentle joke that copper spectacles are better than nothing.

CHAPTER XIII

In Chapter XIII, the Vicar tries to use the spectacle disaster as yet another teaching moment, lecturing his children about the dangers of trying to compete with people above your station, comparing their situation to a fable which he has little Dick recite for the company — the story of a Giant and a Dwarf who become travelling companions and fight adventures together, but in every battle the Giant wins all the glory and rewards while the Dwarf loses first an arm, then an eye, then a leg, until the Dwarf finally declares he will fight no more because the partnership only benefits the Giant while the Dwarf suffers all the injuries. The moral is obvious — when a poor family tries to associate with the rich, the rich enjoy the pleasures while the poor pay the costs — but before the

Vicar can spell this out, the lesson is interrupted by a heated argument between Mrs. Primrose and Mr. Burchell about the girls' planned trip to London. Mrs. Primrose insists passionately on the advantages of the London positions while Burchell argues equally forcefully against them, and as Mrs. Primrose loses the argument on logical grounds she resorts to talking louder and louder until finally, cornered and frustrated, she says something truly cruel — that she knows certain people have their own secret selfish reasons for the advice they give and that she wishes such people would stay away from her house in the future, which is a clear instruction for Burchell to leave and never return. Burchell responds with quiet dignity, saying that yes, he does have secret reasons which he chooses not to reveal because Mrs. Primrose cannot even answer the arguments he has already made openly, and since his visits have clearly become unwelcome he will take his leave now and perhaps return once more to say a final goodbye before he leaves the area entirely. Sophia looks at him with visible distress as he picks up his hat and walks out, but she cannot stop him, and after he is gone the family sits in awkward silence and confusion while Mrs. Primrose tries to cover her guilt with a forced smile. The Vicar is genuinely angry with his wife and rebukes her sharply for treating a stranger with such ingratitude and harshness, calling her words the most unpleasant she has ever spoken, but Mrs. Primrose defends herself by claiming that Burchell's real motive for opposing the London trip is purely selfish — he wants to keep Sophia at home for his own romantic purposes, and she will not have her daughter wasting her time on such a low-lived man. When the Vicar asks Sophia directly whether Burchell has ever shown romantic attachment to her, Sophia answers honestly that his conversation has always been sensible, modest, and pleasant, and mentions that Burchell once said he never knew a woman who could find merit in a man who seemed poor — which is actually one of the most important statements in the novel because Burchell is testing whether anyone can see past his apparent poverty to recognise his true worth, and Sophia has already begun to do exactly that, though she does not fully understand it herself yet. The Vicar, however, dismisses Burchell's comment as the typical excuse of the idle and unfortunate, tells Sophia that a man who has managed his own finances so poorly cannot possibly make a good husband, and says that the upcoming winter in London will give her chances for a much wiser choice. The Vicar then makes a remarkable confession to the reader — he admits that despite his words of rebuke to his wife, he is privately relieved that Burchell is gone because he feared the attachment developing between Burchell and Sophia, and he admits that he silenced his guilty conscience about this breach of hospitality with a few convenient excuses, ending with the devastatingly honest observation that "conscience is a coward, and those faults it has not strength enough to prevent, it seldom has justice enough to accuse" — meaning that our moral sense, when too weak to stop us from doing wrong, usually lacks the courage to make us feel guilty afterward either.

CHAPTER XIV

In Chapter XIV, the girls' journey to London is considered settled and the family turns to the practical problem of raising money for their wardrobe and travel expenses, deciding to sell their remaining horse Blackberry at the neighbouring fair, and since the Moses spectacle disaster is still fresh in everyone's memory, the Vicar decides he must go himself this time rather than trusting anyone else. The Vicar sets off with great confidence in his own worldly wisdom, though his wife calls him back at the door to whisper that he should "have all his eyes about him" — advice that proves sadly prophetic. At the fair, the Vicar puts Blackberry through his paces but finds nothing but criticism from potential buyers — one discovers the horse is blind in one eye, another finds a spavin, a third a windgall, a

fourth suspects worms, and a fifth wonders aloud what anyone could possibly want with such a broken-down animal fit only for a dog kennel — until the Vicar himself begins to feel ashamed of his own horse. In this demoralised state he meets an old clergyman acquaintance and they retreat to an alehouse where they find a venerable silver-haired old gentleman reading a large book, who appears to be the very picture of wisdom and benevolence, and who confirms this impression by generously giving five pounds to a young man in distress without being asked and with perfect gentleness. The Vicar is deeply moved by this display of charity and is then absolutely overwhelmed with delight when the old gentleman, upon hearing his name, recognises him as the famous Dr. Primrose the monogamist, calling him a "glorious pillar of unshaken orthodoxy" and praising his writings with such passionate admiration that the Vicar can barely contain his pleasure. The old man then launches into an elaborate display of classical learning involving ancient historians and Greek quotations about the creation of the world that has absolutely nothing to do with anything but succeeds perfectly in convincing the Vicar that he is talking to a genuine scholar. Eventually the conversation turns to the fair — the Vicar needs to sell a horse and the old gentleman conveniently needs to buy one — and they quickly agree on a price, but when it comes time to pay, the old man produces a thirty-pound note that the Vicar cannot change, and his footman Abraham is sent out but returns saying he cannot get change anywhere in the entire fair. The old gentleman then smoothly proposes an alternative — a written draft payable on sight drawn on Solomon Flamborough, the Vicar's own next-door neighbour, whom the old gentleman claims to know well, even sharing a friendly anecdote about competing with him at three-jumps in their youth. The Vicar accepts the draft, the old gentleman rides off on Blackberry, and it is only after some reflection that the Vicar realises he has been foolish to accept a draft from a stranger and hurries home to cash it immediately. When he shows the draft to Flamborough, his neighbour reads the name — Ephraim Jenkinson — and instantly identifies him as the very same swindler who sold Moses the worthless copper spectacles, describing his silver hair, his trick of talking Greek and cosmogony to impress scholars, and his pocketless coat. The Vicar has been cheated by exactly the same con man who cheated his son, only this time the trickster used flattery about the Vicar's monogamy writings and fake scholarly conversation instead of fake spectacles — exploiting the Vicar's intellectual vanity just as he exploited Moses's commercial naivety, proving that the father is no wiser than the son when his own particular weaknesses are targeted. The Vicar dreads going home to face his family's anger, and resolves to protect himself by getting angry first, but when he arrives he finds the household already in tears over a completely different catastrophe — Squire Thornhill has visited to tell them that the two town ladies have suddenly left for London after receiving malicious reports about the family from some unknown person, and the girls' London trip is therefore cancelled entirely. The family is devastated and cannot imagine who could have spread such damaging gossip about them, but the attentive reader already knows — it was almost certainly Mr. Burchell, who has been warning against the London scheme all along and who, as Sir William Thornhill in disguise, would have both the motive (protecting the girls from what he knows are dangerous women) and the means (his authority as the Squire's uncle) to intervene. The chapter ends with the Vicar's horse swindle completely overshadowed by this larger family disaster, and the Vicar's embarrassment is swallowed up in his family's greater grief.

CHAPTER XV

In Chapter XV, the family spends anxious hours trying to figure out who spread the malicious reports that ruined the girls' London trip, suspecting nearly every family in the neighbourhood without any real evidence. The mystery is solved when one of the little

boys finds a leather letter-case on the village green which turns out to belong to Mr. Burchell, and inside it the family discovers a sealed note addressed to the ladies at Thornhill Castle. The Vicar argues against opening someone else's private correspondence, but Sophia — ironically defending Burchell by saying she is certain he is the last man who could be guilty of such baseness — insists it should be read, and the rest of the family agrees. The letter is read aloud and it warns the two ladies against bringing two young women to London as companions, saying that the writer wishes to protect innocence from being seduced, and that introducing "infamy and vice" into peaceful retreats would be deeply wrong. The family is outraged, interpreting the letter as a vicious attack on their daughters' characters, though the attentive reader can see that the letter is actually ambiguous — its warnings about "infamy and vice" could just as easily refer to the two town ladies themselves as to Olivia and Sophia, and Burchell is almost certainly trying to protect the girls from Lady Blarney and Miss Skeggs, who are likely not respectable women at all. But the family is too angry and too vain to consider this alternative reading, and they unanimously condemn Burchell as a villain motivated by jealousy and spite. When Burchell arrives shortly afterward, Mrs. Primrose executes a planned ambush — greeting him with false friendliness before dramatically confronting him — but the plan backfires badly because Burchell easily outmatches Mrs. Primrose in every exchange of wit, turning her jokes back against her and remaining completely unrattled. The Vicar then takes over, delivering a solemn speech about integrity being more important than genius, but Burchell responds with a genuinely brilliant philosophical argument that great virtues usually accompany great minds and that Providence generally ensures that those with corrupt hearts lack the intelligence to do much harm — a defense that is actually a subtle self-description of his own character. When the Vicar finally confronts him directly with the letter, Burchell shows no shame whatsoever, calmly confirms he wrote it, and then turns the accusation back on the family by pointing out that they committed a crime by breaking open his private correspondence and that he could legally have them punished for it. The Vicar erupts in fury and throws Burchell out of the house, and Burchell picks up his pocket-book with perfect composure and walks away. After he leaves, the Vicar tells his family an allegory about Guilt and Shame — that they started life as companions but eventually separated because they made each other uncomfortable, and Guilt walked forward alone toward punishment while Shame turned back to keep company with the few remaining virtues — the moral being that truly wicked people lose all capacity for shame, which is why Burchell seemed so unbothered by being caught. The great irony of this chapter, which the family completely misses, is that Burchell showed no shame because he has nothing to be ashamed of — he was genuinely trying to protect the girls, and his composure comes from clear conscience rather than hardened villainy.

CHAPTER XVI

In Chapter XVI, with Burchell banished, Squire Thornhill becomes an even more frequent and welcome visitor, spending whole days at the Primrose cottage while the Vicar and Moses work in the fields, entertaining the women with stories about fashionable London life, teaching the girls card games, and even setting the little boys to box each other for his amusement, which he calls making them "sharp." Mrs. Primrose deploys every possible scheme to make Olivia attractive to the Squire — crediting Olivia with every domestic success from crisp cakes to well-made pickles to excellent gooseberry wine, and constantly finding excuses to stand Olivia next to Thornhill to compare their heights. The Squire seems to respond, giving daily signs of affection that never quite amount to a

marriage proposal, and the family excuses his hesitation by assuming he is either naturally shy or afraid of offending his powerful uncle Sir William. A new development seems to confirm the Squire's serious intentions — when the neighbouring Flamborough family has their portraits painted by a travelling painter for fifteen shillings a head, Mrs. Primrose's competitive instinct demands that the Primrose family must have an even grander portrait done. Despite the Vicar's objections, the family commissions an enormous historical family painting in which Mrs. Primrose is Venus with the two little boys as Cupids, the Vicar presents his monogamy books, Olivia is an Amazon in green and gold with a whip, Sophia is a shepherdess with as many sheep as the painter can fit in for free, and Moses wears a hat with a white feather. When Thornhill insists on being included in the painting as Alexander the Great kneeling at Olivia's feet, the family interprets this as proof that he wants to join the family through marriage. The painting is completed with great enthusiasm, but when they try to hang it they discover a devastating problem — it is far too large to fit through any door in the cottage, and it ends up leaning against the kitchen wall, mocked by every neighbour who visits, compared to Robinson Crusoe's boat that was too large to launch. The painting also causes malicious gossip because Thornhill's portrait being united with the family's portrait is seen as scandalous by the neighbours. In response to this pressure, the family hatches a new scheme — Mrs. Primrose will try to force Thornhill into a declaration by pretending to ask his advice about marrying Olivia to someone else, specifically a local farmer named Williams who has genuinely been courting Olivia. Mrs. Primrose executes this scheme while the girls listen from the next room, but Thornhill responds with elaborate flattery — calling Olivia a goddess, an angel, a treasure too great for any one man — while never actually proposing marriage himself, and when directly confronted with the prospect of Olivia marrying farmer Williams, he objects passionately, saying he has deep reasons buried in his heart, but still refuses to make a formal offer. The Vicar correctly observes that Thornhill's speeches contain "more of love than matrimony" — meaning his words express desire and possession rather than commitment and honour — but the family decides to push forward with the farmer Williams strategy anyway, hoping that the threat of a rival will force Thornhill's hand at last.

CHAPTER XVII

In Chapter XVII, farmer Williams begins courting Olivia in earnest with the Vicar's encouragement, since Williams is steady, honest, financially comfortable, and genuinely fond of Olivia — everything the Vicar values in a son-in-law. When Williams and Thornhill meet at the Primrose house they glare at each other with open hostility, but Williams owes no rent to Thornhill and therefore has no reason to fear him. Olivia plays the coquette perfectly, showering Williams with attention while secretly hoping Thornhill will react, and Thornhill does appear genuinely distressed by the competition, looking dejected and pensive as he leaves — though the Vicar is puzzled that if Thornhill is truly in pain he does not simply solve the problem by making an honourable proposal. The Vicar finds Olivia crying alone after one of these encounters and confronts her gently but firmly, telling her that Thornhill's failure to declare himself proves her confidence in his passion was a fantasy, but Olivia insists she knows he has good reasons for delay and that time will prove his sincerity. The Vicar then lays down a clear ultimatum — Olivia may set any date she wishes for Thornhill to make his intentions known, but when that deadline passes without a proposal, she must absolutely marry farmer Williams, and the Vicar's integrity as a man will never be compromised by allowing an honest suitor to be used as a pawn. Olivia agrees and solemnly promises to marry Williams if Thornhill fails to act, and a date

one month away is set for the wedding, with Thornhill informed of the deadline. One week passes and Thornhill does nothing, a second week the same, and in the third week he stops visiting entirely, and Olivia shows what the Vicar interprets as calm resignation. On a cosy evening just four days before the wedding, the whole family gathers around the fire in a beautiful scene of domestic warmth — the Vicar is cheerful and optimistic, Moses jokes about borrowing Williams's cider press after the wedding, and little Bill is asked to sing a comic ballad — "An Elegy on the Death of a Mad Dog" — a wonderfully funny poem about a good man bitten by a mad dog, where everyone expects the man to die but in the twist ending it is the dog that dies, not the man. The Vicar raises a toast, Mrs. Primrose tells stories about her musical relatives, and they have a lighthearted debate about modern poetry and songs. Then the Vicar calls for Olivia to join the singing — and at this exact moment of maximum family happiness, little Dick runs in with the devastating news that Olivia has eloped, having been seen getting into a post-chaise with two gentlemen, one of whom kissed her and called her his angel while she cried and said "O what will my poor pappa do when he knows I am undone." The Vicar's reaction is one of the most powerful and emotionally raw scenes in the entire novel — he breaks down completely, alternating between rage, grief, despair, and cursing, reaching for his pistols and swearing to pursue the villain, while his wife catches him in her arms and tells him the Bible is the only weapon fit for his old hands now. His son George gently rebukes him for cursing and the Vicar catches himself twice, realizing with shame that he called down heaven's fury on the seducer. In his agony the Vicar asks whether Olivia might have been forced away and might therefore still be innocent, but Dick confirms that she went willingly though crying, and Mrs. Primrose bitterly calls her daughter a strumpet who has deserted her parents without provocation. The Vicar however, even in the depths of his grief, makes one of the most morally beautiful declarations in the novel — he says that this house and his heart will always be open to a poor returning repentant sinner, that the first fault is the child of simplicity but every subsequent one is the child of guilt, and that he will welcome Olivia back with open arms even if stained with ten thousand vices, if only she shows repentance. He then picks up his Bible and his staff and sets out to find her — not to punish her but to save her from continuing in sin.

CHAPTER XVIII

In Chapter XVIII, the Vicar sets out to find Olivia, initially suspecting Squire Thornhill as her seducer and heading for Thornhill Castle, but on the way a parishioner tells him he saw a young woman matching Olivia's description in a post-chaise with a man who sounds like Mr. Burchell. The Vicar goes to Thornhill anyway, but the Squire greets him with apparent amazement, swearing on his honour that he knows nothing about the elopement, and the Vicar, remembering that Burchell had been having private conversations with Olivia, shifts his suspicions entirely to Burchell. Another witness then appears claiming to have seen Burchell and Olivia heading toward a spa town thirty miles away, and the Vicar, too desperate and anguished to consider whether these convenient witnesses might have been deliberately planted to mislead him, immediately sets off in pursuit. He walks thirty miles to the spa town and finds no trace of them but is told they went to the races thirty miles further on. At the races he thinks he catches a glimpse of Burchell disappearing into a crowd but cannot reach him. Exhausted, heartbroken, and having walked over seventy miles, the Vicar collapses with a fever at a roadside alehouse and lies ill for nearly three weeks, unable to pay for his care. He is rescued by a chance encounter with a kindly London bookseller — a real historical figure whom Goldsmith gently satirises as the publisher John Newbery — who lends him money. As the Vicar

slowly recovers and begins walking home, he reflects philosophically that human beings can adapt to misery just as they can adapt to happiness, and that the descent into suffering, though it looks black from above, gradually becomes bearable as the mind adjusts itself to its new conditions. On the road home the Vicar falls in with a strolling theatre company and their cart of props and scenery, and he has an entertaining conversation with one of the actors about the state of modern drama — the actor explains that audiences no longer care about good writing or genuine wit but only about spectacle, physical comedy, and famous names, and that the works of Shakespeare and Ben Jonson are popular not because audiences understand them but because the names provide a respectable cover for what are essentially pantomimes. The Vicar arrives at a village where he is mistaken for the company's chaplain and is invited to supper by a very grand-seeming gentleman who holds forth on politics, liberty, and the state of the nation with great authority and passion.

CHAPTER XIX

In Chapter XIX, the Vicar and the actor are led to a magnificent mansion where an elegant supper is served with well-dressed ladies present and lively political conversation flowing. The grand host declares himself a passionate defender of liberty, reads every political newspaper and magazine published, and expresses strong criticism of the king's governance, suggesting the monarch should listen to everyone who is willing to give advice. The Vicar responds with a long, serious, and remarkably sophisticated political speech in which he argues the exact opposite position — that monarchy, far from being tyranny, is actually the best protection of ordinary people against the real tyrants, who are the wealthy aristocracy. He argues that in any society some people will inevitably dominate others, that accumulated wealth naturally creates circles of dependent servants and followers, and that the middle class — the order of people who are too proud to be slaves to the rich but too poor to become tyrants themselves — is the true repository of all the arts, wisdom, and virtue of society. He contends that a strong king actually protects this middle class by dividing the power of the wealthy and preventing them from crushing everyone beneath them, and he points to Holland, Genoa, and Venice as examples of republics where the rich govern the law while the law only governs the poor. He concludes passionately that he would die for sacred monarchy and that every supposed champion of liberty he has ever met has turned out to be a petty tyrant in his own home. This speech enrages his host, who calls him a Jesuit in parson's clothes and demands he leave the house immediately — but at that exact moment a knock at the door announces the arrival of the real master and mistress of the house, revealing that the grand political host is actually nothing more than the butler who has been impersonating his employer and playing the gentleman while the family is away. The Vicar notes drily that the butler "talked politics as well as most country gentlemen do," which is a devastating satirical observation about the shallowness of fashionable political opinions. The real owners of the house, Mr. and Mrs. Arnold, are gracious and welcoming, and the Vicar is astonished and delighted to discover that their niece is none other than Miss Arabella Wilmot — George's former fiancée whose engagement was broken off when the family lost its fortune. Arabella is overjoyed to see the Vicar and insists he stay for several days, and during a walk in the garden she asks about George with transparent emotional concern, revealing that she has never stopped loving him and has rejected all other suitors since the broken engagement. The Vicar tells her sadly that George has been absent for three years without writing and that the family has been struck by poverty and shame. Later that day, a theatre manager arrives selling tickets for that evening's performance of The Fair

Penitent, praising a brilliant new young actor who has joined their company by chance. The Vicar accompanies Arabella and the Arnolds to the performance, which takes place in a barn, and when the new actor steps onto the stage the Vicar is overwhelmed to discover it is his own son George. George, equally shocked at seeing his father and Arabella in the audience, cannot speak, bursts into tears, and flees the stage. Mr. Arnold sends his coach to bring George to the house where he is warmly received, and the evening ends with the quietly touching detail of Arabella trying to hide her powerful emotions behind giddy laughter, meaningless chatter, and sly glances at herself in the mirror — all the nervous behaviour of a young woman who is overjoyed to see the man she loves again but terrified of showing it.

CHAPTER XX

In Chapter XX, George tells the story of his three years of wandering after leaving the family, and it is one of the longest and most entertaining chapters in the novel, essentially a picaresque adventure tale within the larger story. After Mrs. Arnold politely offers to send servants for his luggage, George has to confess that a stick and a wallet are literally all he owns in the world, and the Vicar comments sadly that George left poor and has returned poor. George then narrates his entire journey, beginning with his arrival in London where he goes to their cousin for advice about becoming a schoolteacher, only to be told in hilariously blunt terms that being a school usher is worse than being a prison guard — you must endure being bullied by the master, hated by the mistress, tormented by the boys, and you need to be able to dress hair, have had smallpox, and be willing to sleep three to a bed, all for terrible pay. The cousin instead suggests George become a writer, and George embraces this enthusiastically, writing a book of three brilliant paradoxes that are completely false but entirely original, imagining that the entire learned world will rise up to debate him. Instead, no one notices his book at all, which is an even more crushing fate than being attacked. He then meets a small man who has lived for twelve years by collecting subscriptions for a book he never intends to publish, flattering noblemen into paying dedication fees, and he tries to recruit George's unfamiliar face for the same racket — a devastating portrait of the parasitic world of literary begging. George refuses out of pride and tries to write for magazines instead, but finds that quality writing is ignored while fast mediocre production succeeds, and he sinks into bitterness and envy until he becomes unable to enjoy anyone else's work. He is rescued from this despair by a chance meeting with his old university friend "Ned Thornhill" — who turns out to be Squire Thornhill himself — and becomes a sort of half-friend, half-servant in his household, attending him at auctions, riding in his carriage, and being expected to flatter constantly, which George finds increasingly difficult as he discovers more of Thornhill's real character. George fights a duel on Thornhill's behalf (which the Vicar disapproves of), and when Thornhill leaves London he gives George letters of recommendation to his uncle Sir William Thornhill and to a lord in government. Sir William, however, refuses to help, perceiving that George has been enabling his nephew's vices, and tells George his refusal should serve as punishment and motivation for repentance. The great lord, meanwhile, keeps George waiting endlessly, eventually rushes past him into a carriage, and mutters an answer that is lost in the rattling of wheels — one of the novel's most brilliantly observed comic scenes about the contempt of the powerful for those who need them. Desperate, George nearly sells himself into indentured servitude to a Mr. Crispe who recruits people for transportation to America as virtual slaves, but a sea captain saves him by suggesting he go to Amsterdam to teach English to the Dutch. George sails to Holland only to discover, with wonderful comic absurdity, that in order to teach Dutchmen English he would first need to learn Dutch himself — a problem that had somehow never occurred to him. He then travels to Louvain to teach Greek at the university, but the

principal tells him flatly that he has earned his doctorate, his salary, and his comfortable life all without Greek, and therefore Greek must be worthless. George then wanders through Flanders and France as a travelling musician, finding that peasants welcome his playing but wealthy people despise it — an observation about how the world values talents only when they are displayed as luxuries rather than necessities. In Paris he reunites with his cousin who is now working as a fake art expert, buying paintings for an English collector by following two simple rules: always say the painting could have been better if the painter tried harder, and always praise the works of Pietro Perugino. George becomes a travelling tutor to an incredibly miserly young heir who counts every penny across Europe and eventually abandons George in Italy to save money by sailing home. George then supports himself across Europe by competing in philosophical debates at universities, where challengers who argue well receive food, lodging, and money — and he discovers through all his travels that monarchy is the best government for the poor and that wealth everywhere equals freedom. Finally he joins a company of strolling actors in England and is cast as Horatio in The Fair Penitent, the performance that brings about his reunion with his father and Arabella Wilmot.

CHAPTER XXI

In Chapter XXI, George finishes his story the following day over dinner, but the pleasant atmosphere is disrupted by the arrival of Squire Thornhill, who starts visibly upon seeing George and the Vicar but quickly recovers his composure. The butler privately informs the Vicar that Thornhill has already been making advances toward Miss Arabella Wilmot and that her aunt and uncle seem to approve, which is alarming news given what the Vicar knows about Thornhill's true character. Thornhill takes the Vicar aside and asks about Olivia, expressing concern and urging the Vicar to keep her disappearance secret, which the Vicar agrees to for the moment. However, Thornhill's romantic pursuit of Arabella is obvious and persistent, though Arabella seems to tolerate his attention more out of obedience to her relatives than from genuine feeling, and the Vicar notices with quiet satisfaction that she directs genuine warmth and affection toward George even as she endures Thornhill's company. In a particularly cunning move, Thornhill announces that he has used his influence to procure George an ensign's military commission for a regiment going to the West Indies — a distant and dangerous posting — for only one hundred pounds, which Thornhill generously offers to advance himself if the family cannot raise it. The Vicar gratefully signs a bond for the money, and George is sent off to London immediately to secure the commission before someone else can claim it. The Vicar's farewell speech to George, urging him to remember his brave grandfather and fight honourably, is touching but also reveals how completely the family has been manipulated — Thornhill has effectively removed George from the scene, separating him from Arabella and eliminating the one family member strong enough to physically protect his sisters, all while appearing magnificently generous. After leaving the Arnold household, the Vicar travels homeward and stops at an inn where the landlord confirms what was said earlier — that Squire Thornhill is universally hated in the neighbourhood for seducing and abandoning young women while his uncle Sir William is genuinely loved. The landlord's wife then complains about a female lodger upstairs who has not paid her bill and begins dragging the young woman out by her hair, and the Vicar instantly recognizes the voice as Olivia's. In one of the novel's most emotionally powerful moments, he rushes to rescue her and clasps her in his arms, saying she is welcome despite everything, and Olivia sobs that she does not deserve such kindness. Olivia then reveals the full truth — it was Thornhill, not Burchell, who seduced her; the two town ladies were actually prostitutes hired by

Thornhill to lure the girls to London; and Burchell's letter that the family condemned as malicious was actually his attempt to protect them from Thornhill's scheme. Most crucially, Olivia reveals that she was married to Thornhill by a Catholic priest in a ceremony she knew was not legally binding, but the Vicar seizes on this detail, arguing that a marriage performed by an ordained priest is sacred and valid regardless of legal technicalities. His hope is crushed, however, when Olivia tells him that Thornhill has used the same priest to perform the same fraudulent ceremony with six or eight other women, all of whom he subsequently abandoned. The Vicar considers prosecuting the priest but Olivia has sworn an oath of secrecy about his identity, and the Vicar — in a moment of strict moral consistency — refuses to ask her to break that oath even for the greater good, arguing that in religion one must never do evil to achieve good. Olivia describes how after the sham marriage Thornhill introduced her to other women he had similarly deceived, how she tried to drown her shame in social pleasures, how he eventually tried to pass her along to another man, and how she finally fled in rage and despair, ending up at this inn where the hostile landlady was about to throw her into the street.

CHAPTER XXI

In Chapter XXII, the Vicar sets out on horseback the next morning with Olivia riding behind him, heading home and spending the journey trying to prepare her emotionally for facing her mother, pointing out the beauty of the countryside as evidence of heaven's kindness, assuring her of his unchanging love, and recommending books as companions that never reproach us for our failings. He decides to leave Olivia at an inn five miles from home so he can go ahead and prepare the family for her return, and as he walks the last miles home at night his heart fills with tender anticipation — he imagines his wife's embrace, his children's joy, and the warmth of his fireside. But when he arrives at the cottage near midnight, instead of the peaceful scene he has been picturing, he finds the house engulfed in flames, with fire pouring from every window. He collapses on the ground in shock, and when his family revives him he discovers they have all escaped — but then realizes the two youngest children are missing. His wife says calmly and terribly that they have burned to death and she will die with them, but the Vicar hears their cries from inside the burning building and, in an act of desperate heroism, rushes through the flames, breaks down the door, and carries both children out in his arms just seconds before the roof collapses. Standing before the ruins holding his rescued children, he cries out that the flames can burn everything because he has saved his true treasure. However, his arm is badly burned from shoulder to hand, his goods are destroyed including the money set aside for his daughters' fortunes, and the family is left with almost nothing — only an outbuilding that the neighbours help furnish with basic necessities. The next morning the Vicar tells his family about finding Olivia and sends Moses and Sophia to bring her home. Olivia arrives trembling and unable to speak or look up, and Mrs. Primrose, whose pride has been somewhat broken by the fire, nevertheless cannot resist several bitter remarks about Olivia's disgrace, telling her this poor place is all she has come back to after her fine company. The Vicar firmly silences his wife with a powerful speech about forgiveness, declaring that heaven is more pleased by one repentant sinner than by ninety-nine people who never strayed, and that the single effort of stopping on the downhill path to destruction is itself a greater act of virtue than a hundred acts of ordinary goodness.

CHAPTER XXIII

In Chapter XXIII, the family slowly begins to rebuild its life in the damaged outbuilding, with the Vicar reading aloud to his family since his burned arm prevents him from working. The neighbours visit daily with sympathy and practical help, and farmer Williams even tries to renew his courtship of Olivia, but she rejects him permanently — she has lost not only her innocence but her capacity for happiness, becoming anxious, envious of Sophia, physically wasting away, and unable to take pleasure in anything. The Vicar tries to comfort her by telling the elaborate story of Matilda — a tale about a woman who loses her infant son when he falls into a river, is captured by soldiers, rescued by a young officer who marries her, and then years later, when her husband is about to be executed by enemy soldiers, discovers that the commanding general about to order the death is her long-lost son, now grown up, who recognizes his mother and saves both her and her husband. The moral is that Providence works in mysterious ways and that situations that appear hopeless can be transformed by unforeseen developments — but Olivia is too consumed by her own misery to be comforted by anyone else's story. The family then receives devastating news — Thornhill is going to marry Arabella Wilmot. The Vicar sends Moses to deliver a letter exposing Thornhill's crimes, but Moses returns saying it was impossible to deliver the letter because Thornhill and Arabella were travelling around the country together in magnificent style, with the wedding imminent, Sir William Thornhill himself in attendance, and the entire region celebrating. The Vicar responds to this news with extraordinary dignity, telling his family to look around at their straw bed, ruined walls, and burned shelter, and then asking them to understand that he would not exchange his situation for Thornhill's for a thousand worlds, because the good are like travellers heading home while the wicked are like travellers going into exile. Olivia faints upon hearing about the wedding, and when she recovers she appears eerily calm — a tranquillity the Vicar interprets as resignation but which is actually the dangerous numbness of despair.

CHAPTER XXIV

In Chapter XXIV, on a warm morning the family breakfasts outside by the honeysuckle bank — the very spot where Olivia first met Thornhill — and Olivia is asked to sing a song, which she performs with such heartbreaking pathos that even her mother weeps and embraces her. The song, "When Lovely Woman Stoops to Folly," is one of Goldsmith's most famous poems and consists of just two devastating stanzas asking what a woman can do after being betrayed, answering that the only remedy for her shame is to die — a poem whose darkness is barely concealed by its elegant simplicity. This fragile moment of peace is shattered when Thornhill's carriage appears and he walks up to the Vicar with his usual casual confidence. The Vicar, no longer able or willing to contain his fury, calls Thornhill a wretch and a liar to his face, telling him his meanness is the only thing protecting him from physical violence. Thornhill responds with stunning callousness, feigning surprise at any suggestion of wrongdoing, then offering to help marry Olivia off to someone else while generously continuing to see her on the side as his mistress — a proposal so degrading that the Vicar can barely contain his rage. When the Vicar refuses, Thornhill drops his pretense of friendliness and reveals his true power — he mentions that the bond the Vicar signed for George's commission has been transferred to Thornhill's attorney who is threatening legal action, and that his steward is considering driving for unpaid rent, and that he graciously invites the family to attend his wedding to Arabella, a final

calculated insult. The Vicar responds magnificently, telling Thornhill that neither his friendship nor his threats will change anything, that he has been irreparably deceived, and that while Thornhill may have his forgiveness he will always have his contempt. Thornhill leaves threatening consequences, and they come swiftly — the steward arrives the next day to seize the Vicar's cattle for unpaid rent, and they are sold for less than half their value. The family begs the Vicar to compromise, to invite Thornhill back, to do anything to avoid prison, but the Vicar refuses absolutely, declaring that mental imprisonment through moral compromise is worse than any physical jail. The next morning, as Moses is clearing snow from the door, two officers of justice arrive to arrest the Vicar for debt and take him to the county gaol eleven miles away, and the family must prepare to follow.

CHAPTER XXV

In Chapter XXV, the family sets out through deep snow toward the prison town, with Olivia too weak from fever to walk and one of the officers kindly letting her ride his horse, while the Vicar leans on Sophia and Mrs. Primrose carries the little children. About two miles from home, fifty of the Vicar's poorest parishioners come running after them, seize the officers, and threaten violence to prevent their beloved minister from going to prison. The Vicar, despite everything, immediately intervenes to rescue the officers and delivers a firm rebuke to his flock, telling them that defying the law will only bring ruin on themselves and him, demanding to know who their ringleader is, and insisting they return peacefully to their homes — a scene that powerfully demonstrates his commitment to law and order even when the law is being used unjustly against him. The parishioners weep, shake his hand one by one, and receive his blessing before turning back. The family reaches the prison town and the Vicar sups with his family at an inn with his "usual cheerfulness" before being led to the gaol — a former military fortress with one large stone-paved common room shared by felons and debtors during the day, and individual locked cells at night. He is required to pay an entry fee which nearly exhausts his remaining money, and the prisoners immediately spend it all on drink, filling the prison with riot and profanity. The Vicar sits alone in a corner, reflecting that these wicked men seem cheerful while he is miserable despite having more reason to be happy, when a fellow prisoner approaches and offers to share his bedclothes, since the Vicar has none. This man turns out to be intelligent and worldly-wise, and when the Vicar tries to impress him with a Greek quotation, the prisoner responds with a familiar speech about Sanconiathon, Manetho, Berosus, and Ocellus Lucanus — the same string of pedantic classical references the Vicar has heard before. He instantly recognizes Ephraim Jenkinson, the same con man who swindled both Moses with the spectacles and the Vicar himself with the fake horse sale. Jenkinson is now in prison for counterfeiting, with Flamborough ready to testify against him at the next court session. Far from being angry, the Vicar is grateful for Jenkinson's kindness in offering to share his bed, and promises to try to soften Flamborough's evidence against him. Jenkinson reveals that his venerable silver hair was a wig and that he can disguise himself as any age from seventeen to seventy, and he says regretfully that if he had spent half as much effort learning an honest trade as he spent learning to be a criminal, he would have been a rich man. He promises to be the Vicar's friend in prison, "perhaps when you least expect it" — a promise that will prove important later. The chapter ends with the Vicar being led to his cold stone cell, spreading his straw and borrowed blankets on the floor, praying to his "heavenly corrector," and falling asleep with perfect tranquillity — a man who has lost everything except his faith and his integrity.

CHAPTER XXVI

In Chapter XXVI, the Vicar wakes in prison to find his family in tears at his bedside, frightened by the grim surroundings, and he gently reassures them that he slept more peacefully than he has in a long time. He learns that Olivia's fever has worsened and she had to be left behind, then sends Moses to find lodging for his wife and daughters near the prison while the gaoler kindly allows Moses and the two little boys to sleep in the Vicar's cell. In a touching moment, when the Vicar asks the little boys if they are afraid to sleep in such a dark and frightening place, Dick says he is not afraid to lie anywhere his papa is, and four-year-old Bill says he loves any place best where his papa is. The Vicar organises the family — Sophia must watch over the sick Olivia, his wife will attend him, the little boys will read to him, and sixteen-year-old Moses must work as a day labourer to earn money for the family's survival. When the Vicar ventures into the common prison he is revolted by the swearing, lewdness, and brutality of the inmates, but instead of retreating permanently he resolves to reform them, seeing it as his duty to attempt the reclamation of even the most degraded souls. He tells Jenkinson his plan, which everyone treats as a wonderful new source of entertainment, and when the Vicar begins reading scripture to the prisoners they mock him relentlessly — turning his wig, spitting on his book, crying "amen" sarcastically, stealing his spectacles, and replacing one of his books with an obscene joke book. But the Vicar persists with calm dignity, knowing that the ridicule will only work the first few times while the serious message will eventually take hold, and within six days some prisoners are genuinely penitent and all are paying attention. He then goes further, organising the prisoners into productive work cutting pegs for tobacconists and shoemakers, instituting fines for bad behaviour and rewards for hard work, and within two weeks has transformed the prison from a place of chaos into something resembling a small orderly community. The chapter then expands into one of Goldsmith's most important social arguments — a passionate case for prison reform and against excessive capital punishment, arguing that prisons as currently run create criminals rather than reforming them, that hanging people for property crimes is morally unjustifiable since no person has the right to barter away their life and therefore no social contract can legitimately demand it, that making all crimes equally punishable destroys people's ability to distinguish between serious and minor offenses, and that the severity of English criminal law — which produces more convicts than half of Europe combined — is both a symptom and a cause of social breakdown, since the poor are punished by laws made by the rich to protect accumulated wealth.

CHAPTER XXVII

In Chapter XXVII, the Vicar's family initially opposes his prison reform project, arguing it is hopeless and undignified, but the Vicar responds with one of his most powerful moral declarations — that fallen men are still men, that good counsel rejected enriches the giver, and that a soul buried in a dungeon is as precious as one seated on a throne. He returns to the common prison where the inmates greet him with fresh tricks and pranks, but he endures everything with patient dignity and within days has them all listening attentively and some genuinely reforming. He establishes a working economy within the prison and creates rules and rewards that give the inmates structure and purpose, and he reflects that society should focus on reformation rather than punishment. Meanwhile, Jenkinson meets the Vicar's family for the first time and is struck by Sophia's beauty and the children's goodness, telling the Vicar they are too good for such a place. Jenkinson then

recognises Moses as the young man he cheated with the green spectacles, and Moses generously forgives him with a smile and a handshake, asking only what it was about his appearance that marked him as an easy target, to which Jenkinson replies honestly that it was his white stockings and black hair ribbon rather than anything in his face. Jenkinson then offers a remarkably wise observation about his own life — that being thought cunning from childhood forced him into actually becoming a criminal because nobody would trust him anyway, and that his honest simple neighbour Flamborough grew rich while he himself remained poor and miserable through all his cleverness, concluding that knowing too much about the world's tricks is actually the greatest foolishness of all because it destroys the trust that makes honest prosperity possible. He listens to the Vicar's full story, slaps his forehead as if struck by an idea, and leaves saying he will try to help — setting up the mechanism for the novel's eventual resolution.

CHAPTER XXVIII

In Chapter XXVIII, after more than a fortnight in prison, the Vicar asks to see Olivia and is shocked by her appearance — her temples are sunken, her face deathly pale, and she is clearly dying. She begs him to submit to Thornhill for the sake of his own freedom, but the Vicar refuses, saying he will never acknowledge his daughter as a prostitute, insisting instead that he regards her transgression as a mark of naivety rather than deliberate wickedness. Jenkinson suggests writing to Sir William Thornhill to expose his nephew's crimes, and the Vicar sends the letter, but after five anxious days no reply comes. The Vicar's health deteriorates, his burned arm worsens, and then comes the devastating news that Olivia has died — or so Jenkinson reports. The Vicar is crushed, and his two little boys try to comfort him with heartbreaking innocence, asking if their sister is now an angel and saying heaven must be a nicer place than prison. Jenkinson urges the Vicar that with Olivia dead, there is no longer any moral reason to resist Thornhill's marriage to Arabella, and the Vicar, broken at last, agrees to sign a letter of submission. Moses delivers it to Thornhill, who responds with contemptuous cruelty — saying the submission is too late, that he has heard of the letter to Sir William which met with the contempt it deserved, and that all future communication should go through his attorney, adding with characteristic vileness that the two younger daughters might have been more persuasive intercessors. The Vicar accepts this final humiliation with weary dignity, saying he is drawing toward an abode that grows brighter as he approaches it. Then his wife appears in terror — Sophia has been kidnapped, snatched from the roadside by a well-dressed stranger who forced her into a post-chaise and drove away at speed. The Vicar cries out that the sum of his misery is now complete — not one daughter left. But Moses produces a letter from George that brings unexpected light — George is happy, prospering as a military officer, dancing at balls, and cheerfully unaware of the family's catastrophes. Mrs. Primrose then makes a terrible confession — in a moment of vengeful fury she wrote to George demanding he come home and avenge the family's honour by confronting Thornhill, but by Providence's mercy the letter went astray and never reached him. The Vicar is horrified by what might have happened but grateful it was prevented. This brief relief is destroyed when a commotion is heard from below, chains clank along the passage, and the gaoler brings in a man covered in blood and loaded with heavy irons — it is George himself, who despite the lost letter somehow learned of the family's situation, came home, challenged Thornhill to a duel, was ambushed by four of Thornhill's servants, wounded one seriously, and has been arrested for assault with a deadly weapon, facing possible execution. The Vicar breaks down completely, cursing Thornhill, before George firmly rebukes him for forgetting his holy calling and his own teachings about fortitude,

and asks his father to prepare him for death rather than rage against his enemies. The Vicar gathers himself and asks the gaoler to assemble all the prisoners, then delivers his final and greatest sermon.

CHAPTER XXIX

In Chapter XXIX, the Vicar delivers his sermon to the assembled prisoners — the longest continuous speech in the novel and the culmination of its moral and theological argument. Speaking from his straw bed, too weak to stand, supported by his son and wife, the Vicar addresses the fundamental question that his entire story has been building toward: why do good people suffer? He argues that philosophy offers only contradictory comfort — telling us life is full of pleasures but also that it is mercifully short, which cannot both be consoling at once — and that only religion provides genuine answers. Religion teaches that earthly life is a preparation for eternity, that the good are building their own heaven while the wicked are building their own hell, and that the miserable have a special advantage over the fortunate because their suffering makes the eternal reward more precious by contrast, just as the poor man in the parable of Lazarus found his heavenly happiness increased by the memory of his earthly suffering. The Vicar insists he is not romanticising poverty — he states bluntly that those who lack the necessities of life are genuinely miserable and no philosophical abstraction can ease the pain of cold, hunger, or imprisonment — but he argues that precisely because the wretched cannot find comfort in this world, the promise of heaven should be peculiarly dear to them, and that death, far from being a terror, is actually the messenger of glad tidings and the staff of support for those who have nothing left on earth. He concludes with soaring eloquence that the prisoners should take comfort because their journey's end is near, that the rich will no longer trample them, that they will be surrounded by friends and reunited with those they love, and that their bliss will be not only unutterable but unending. This sermon represents the Vicar at his absolute moral peak — stripped of every earthly possession, his daughters lost, his son condemned, his health failing, and yet still finding the strength not only to endure but to minister to others, transforming his own suffering into a source of consolation for people even more wretched than himself.

CHAPTER XXX

In Chapter XXX, after the sermon, George is moved to a stronger cell but is allowed morning visits, and the Vicar lies down exhausted. Then events begin moving with extraordinary speed toward resolution. Jenkinson brings news that Sophia has been seen alive with a strange gentleman, and moments later Moses runs in to announce that Sophia is downstairs with Mr. Burchell. Sophia rushes in and embraces her father, introducing Burchell as her brave rescuer, and tells the dramatic story of how Burchell, walking along the road with his great stick — the very stick the family used to laugh at — saw the kidnapping, chased the post-chaise on foot, knocked the postillion to the ground with a single blow, then fought and defeated the armed kidnapper, shattering his sword and chasing him away. The Vicar, overwhelmed with gratitude and shame at how the family treated Burchell, immediately offers Sophia's hand in marriage, saying he knows Burchell has her heart and that she is a treasure not of beauty but of mind. Burchell seems to accept in spirit but makes no direct answer, instead ordering an elaborate dinner with a

dozen bottles of wine sent to the prison — behaviour that seems wildly inconsistent with a poor man's means. When told of George's imprisonment, Burchell asks if the prisoner's name is George but says nothing more. Then George is brought in and immediately recognises Burchell with astonishment, standing at a respectful distance and refusing to approach. Burchell suddenly transforms before the entire company, assuming an air of extraordinary natural majesty, and begins to rebuke George for fighting a duel — but is interrupted by a servant announcing that a person of distinction has arrived and wishes to wait upon him. Burchell casually tells the servant to make the visitor wait, then reveals himself in full — he is Sir William Thornhill, the famous baronet, who has been travelling in disguise for years testing people's true characters. He pardons George after reading Mrs. Primrose's letter and understanding the provocation, then declares he has come to see justice done. Sir William's identity is confirmed by the gaoler who knows him well, and the family is stunned — Mrs. Primrose shrinks with embarrassment at remembering how rudely she treated him, while Sophia, who moments before thought he was hers, realizes the enormous social distance that now separates them and weeps silently. Sir William sends Jenkinson with two guards to capture Timothy Baxter, the man who kidnapped Sophia, and while they wait little Bill climbs onto Sir William's knee and is given gingerbread, just as Burchell always gave the children treats.

CHAPTER XXXI

In Chapter XXXI, everything comes together in a rapid cascade of revelations and reversals. Squire Thornhill arrives and tries to embrace his uncle but is pushed away, and Sir William demands to know how he could seduce the Vicar's daughter, throw the father into prison, and have the son arrested. Thornhill defends himself with apparent reasonableness — claiming his relationship with Olivia was merely public appearances that gossip exaggerated, that the Vicar insulted him when he tried to explain, and that the prison and debt proceedings were handled by his attorney and steward without his personal involvement. Sir William is initially persuaded this is not unpardonable, merely ungracious. But then Jenkinson returns with Timothy Baxter, the kidnapper, who confesses everything — Thornhill hired him, gave him gentleman's clothes, and provided the post-chaise for a plot in which Baxter would kidnap Sophia, Thornhill would arrive pretending to rescue her, they would stage a fake fight, and Thornhill would win Sophia's gratitude and love by appearing as her hero. Thornhill's butler, called to testify, confirms everything and adds that Baxter was also the man who regularly procured women for Thornhill, and reveals that Jenkinson was the one who brought the priest for the sham marriage with Olivia. Sir William is horrified and orders George freed, then calls for Olivia to appear — but the Vicar says with anguish that she is dead. Then Miss Arabella Wilmot arrives completely by accident, having spotted one of the Primrose boys playing in the street while passing through town on her way to her wedding with Thornhill. She is shocked to learn the truth about Thornhill, who told her George had married and emigrated to America. Mrs. Primrose passionately defends George and attacks Thornhill, Arabella declares she has been cruelly deceived, and when George enters the room in his military uniform — cleaned up by Jenkinson — Arabella rushes to him, begging forgiveness for believing Thornhill's lies. Thornhill tries to save himself by claiming Arabella's fortune is legally his through signed marriage articles, but Jenkinson delivers the final devastating blow — Thornhill is already legally married and therefore cannot claim Arabella's fortune at all. When Thornhill denies ever being legally married, Jenkinson explains with evident pleasure that when Thornhill commissioned him to arrange a fake licence and fake priest for the ceremony with Olivia, Jenkinson secretly obtained a real licence and a real priest

instead, so the marriage to Olivia is completely valid and binding. He did this not out of generosity but as blackmail insurance, but the result is that Olivia is Thornhill's lawful wife, she is restored to honour as a married woman, and Thornhill has no legal claim on Arabella's fortune. As the room erupts in joy, Jenkinson then brings in Olivia herself — alive and well, her death having been a lie orchestrated by Jenkinson and Mrs. Primrose to convince the Vicar to sign the submission letter, which could only be achieved if he believed Olivia was dead and therefore had no moral reason to resist Thornhill's marriage to Arabella. The Vicar clasps his living daughter in his arms in one of literature's most emotionally overwhelming reunion scenes. Thornhill collapses and begs for mercy, and Sir William — at the Vicar's request — grants him a bare competence rather than total ruin, with Olivia as his legal wife receiving a third of his former fortune. Sir William then teases Sophia by suggesting she should marry Jenkinson as a reward for his services, and Sophia nearly faints with horror before Sir William reveals that he himself wishes to marry her, having spent years searching for a woman who could love him as a man without knowing his fortune, and having found that woman in Sophia who loved the humble Mr. Burchell for his character alone. George and Arabella are reunited, old Mr. Wilmot consents to their marriage, and the whole company leaves the prison in triumph to celebrate at the inn.

CHAPTER XXXII

In the final chapter, the Vicar wakes to learn one last piece of good fortune — the London merchant who went bankrupt and caused the family's original ruin has been arrested in Antwerp and his assets recovered, meaning the Vicar's original fortune is largely restored. George generously offers to release the Vicar from the marriage settlement signed the day before, since George is now wealthy through his marriage to Arabella, and Sir William confirms this is fair and proper. A double wedding is planned for that very morning — Sir William and Sophia, and George and Arabella — and the Vicar tries to impose proper solemnity on the occasion by reading two homilies and a thesis of his own composing, but everyone is too happy to be serious. At church there is a charming dispute about which couple should be married first, each bride insisting the other should go first, until the Vicar threatens to close his book and take everyone home, which immediately settles the matter. The Flamborough family is invited to the celebration, and Jenkinson escorts the elder Miss Flamborough while Moses takes the younger — with the Vicar noting that Moses has developed a genuine affection for the girl and will have his consent and blessing whenever he asks. The parishioners who tried to rescue the Vicar from the officers are gently scolded by Sir William and then given money to drink his health. The novel ends with a perfect image of restored domestic happiness — the Vicar sits by a cheerful fireside with his two little ones on his knees, surrounded by his children and their partners, Mrs. Primrose beside him though slightly disappointed that she did not get to carve the meat at dinner, and the Vicar reflecting that he has nothing left on earth to wish for, that all his cares are over, and that his only remaining duty is to ensure that his gratitude in good fortune exceeds his former patience in adversity.