

**THE RIVERSIDE LITERATURE  
SERIES. THE GOOD-  
NATURED MAN SHE  
STOOPS TO CONQUER**

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The Riverside Literature Series. The Good-Natured Man She Stoops to Conquer by Oliver Goldsmith

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*Oliver Goldsmith.*

The Riverside Literature Series

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THE GOOD-NATURED MAN  
SHE STOOPS TO CONQUER

BY

OLIVER GOLDSMITH

EDITED WITH INTRODUCTION AND  
NOTES BY

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## INTRODUCTION

**Goldsmith's Life.** Oliver Goldsmith was born into a home of genteel poverty at Pallasmore, in County Longford, Ireland, November 10, 1728. His father, the Reverend Charles Goldsmith, held livings successively at Pallasmore and at Lissoy in Westmeath, and it was in the schools of the surrounding hamlets that Oliver Goldsmith received his first instruction. He passed from the lax tuition of his masters to Trinity College, Dublin, and took his Bachelor of Arts degree February 27, 1749, without having distinguished himself in any way except as an independent and rather irregular student.

The Reverend Charles Goldsmith died during his son's college days. In 1753 Oliver Goldsmith left the home of his widowed mother for the last time, to seek his fortune in the world. Thenceforward we have legends of him in prison at Newcastle, studying medicine at Louvain, playing the flute in Switzerland and in Italy, and conversing with Voltaire and Diderot in Paris. His talents matured slowly; at twenty-three he was projecting a new life in the new world; at twenty-eight he was under-master in the school of Dr. Milner at Peckham; at twenty-nine he was at last definitely enlisted in the struggle for bread in the garrets of eighteenth century Grub Street. Even here his advance was slow, but against the odds of poverty, su-



perfcial education, and unpromising personal address, he forged forward by force of preëminent artistic genius to a place in the circle of Johnson and Reynolds and Burke. Now pinched by want, now made rich by a bookseller's stipend, Goldsmith, who never married, lived the fifteen years of his literary success among his cronies of the town, and at the age of forty-five, just when his apprenticeship was over and he could look forward to greater work than he had ever done, he fell a victim to a disease that had first taken hold of him as a result of his early poverty. Goldsmith died April 4, 1774.

Goldsmith as a Writer. He "left scarcely any kind of writing untouched, and touched nothing that he did not adorn," wrote Johnson for Goldsmith's monument. With the single exception of tragedy, Goldsmith undertook at one time or another throughout his life all the forms of composition practiced by his contemporaries. And he was not only efficient in all of these fields; in many of them his work shows a positive advance beyond the achievement of the time. In poetry and romance, the sincerity of Goldsmith's workmanship showed itself in simplicity of expression and purity and tenderness of appeal to the heart; in comedy, it showed itself in a discarding of the comic types of his day for a more genuine presentment of the life of the world in which he lived. *The Citizen of the World* in essay; *The Traveller* and *The Deserted Village* in verse; *The Vicar of Wakefield* in romance; *The Good-Natured Man* and *She Stoops to Conquer* in comedy have maintained a common popularity from

Goldsmith's day to this, and promise to live as long as the language. Even Goldsmith's hack-work is not all unworthy of him, and though in *The Present State of Polite Learning* (his first book, published 1759), *The History of England* (1771), and in his *Animated Nature* (1774) there is displayed the superficiality of the author's learning, these works are saved by the purity of his style and the general sanity of his judgments.

**Eighteenth Century Drama.** English tragedy reached its height at the end of the sixteenth century in the great plays of the Elizabethan age. A hundred years later, Congreve, Farquhar, and Wycherly dominated the classic age of English comedy. The eighteenth century saw the decline of both tragedy and comedy. Goldsmith and Sheridan gave comedy renewed vitality for the decade of the seventies, but these had no followers who were worthy of their inheritance, and the nineteenth century brought forward no figure who can stand for a moment beside them.

This does not mean that the stage took a smaller part in the life of eighteenth century England than it had taken before, or that theatres were ever better managed. Colley Cibber and Garrick stand without peers as managers, and the latter was the most versatile actor of England, if not of modern times. Yet the rise of the manager and actor saw the decline of the author. Sheridan in *The School for Scandal*, his first play to gain real success, was so fortunate as to act as both author and manager. Garrick was arbitrary master not only of his stage, but also of the form and

structure of all that appeared upon it. From the time of Cibber down to the present, English plays have had to do with the theatre rather than with literature.

The decline of the drama after Wycherly may be recounted in a series of striking phenomena. Setting aside the growing indecency of these early plays, itself a sign of change in literature as well as in society, the first sign of dissolution appeared in the so-called sentimental drama of Steele. Than Steele there has been no more fascinating figure in our literature. Yet his four plays, *The Funeral*, *The Tender Husband*, *The Lying Lover*, *The Conscious Lovers*, took from drama that element of frank vitality that is necessary for its life. Advised by Colley Cibber and influenced by Jeremy Collier, Steele applied to plays the rules of propriety, repose, and good manners that served him so well in writing his sketches and his essays. The second of these plays was "damned for its piety" after a few appearances. The last succeeded in spite of the fact that, as Fielding's Parson Adams says, it contained some things "solemn enough for a sermon." It is a long way from the sentimental comedy of Steele to that sentimental comedy that Goldsmith satirizes, yet the later form was a logical outgrowth of the earlier, and of the spirit of the times.

Not upon Steele should be placed the burden of responsibility for the decline of the drama. There are signs enough that show us that deterioration was to be expected. In the first place, the stage had become less of an organ of public opinion than it had been at the beginning and at the end of the seventeenth century. Steele, who may be called one of the last writers of