

English Short Stories

ENGLISH SHORT STORIES



AN ANTHOLOGY

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FICTION

ENGLISH SHORT STORIES
FROM THE FIFTEENTH TO
THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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Everyman, I will go with thee, and be thy guide,
In thy most need to go by thy side.

product of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which in its best examples exhibits the highest form of literary art. But this second stream is not unaffected by the character of the waters of its source. The modern writer of a short story writes to give pleasure, regardless of pointing the moral, but he cannot write at all without a nucleus of thought, which either provides a pungent commentary on life, or arouses that sense of incongruity which lies at the base of the truest humour, or creates that feeling of tragic horror for which philosophers have claimed a mental and spiritual value of a very high order. The best type of modern story may not be a morality, but it is most assuredly a thing of vision, spiritual outlook and discernment, nor does it ever wholly satisfy. It sets the mind roaming in mystic realms and "fairy-lands forlorn," or leaves behind that sense of wonder on "Man, on Nature and on human life" which uplifts and preserves the soul of man in a material world.

The church of primitive times used the short story for teaching purposes, and the earliest examples were drawn from Greek sources of the fifth century A.D., a number of these little narratives being translated into late West-Saxon and enshrined in sermons as well as in the works of Alfred, the ninth century Englished version of Bede, and the works of Bishop Wærferth, while it is worth noting that Bede also tells several excellent stories of native origin. This type of devotional story was more fully developed in the thirteenth century, which saw the production of the *South English Legendary*, a compendious collection of lives of the saints for the use of the church throughout the year. Besides the religious story, we find in this period the use of short *exempla* in sermons and homilies as well as fables and apologues, the former dealing with the doings of animals, the latter with human beings, and all pointing a moral in the most uncompromising manner.

Meanwhile, the short poetic story in the form of romance or lay was making its way into favour and was well established towards the end of the thirteenth century. Of the earliest examples the best is that known as the *Lay of Sir Orfeo*, a variant on the tale of Orpheus and Eurydice. Another variety of short tale of the period is the *fabliau*, which might be fitly described as the precursor of Chaucer's *Miller's Tale* and the ancestor of the *novella*, but of which very few examples survived, one of the most remarkable and typical being *The*

Vox and The Wolf of the second half of the thirteenth century, really an episode of the old romance of Reynard. So we pass by way of what may be described as Langland's collection of *fabliaux* to Gower and Chaucer, remembering also, in passing, that the folk-tale passed from mouth to mouth played a great part in pre-printing days in keeping alive the love of a tale among young and old alike.

Gower's *Confessio Amantis* (1383 or 4) is really a collection of short stories in verse directly illustrating ethics and doctrine, and inferior to the *Canterbury Tales* in that they are faulty as studies of character and weighed down by the moralising which surrounds them. Chaucer is the beginner of story-telling as a fine art. He draws upon the old material, but like Shakespeare, he knows how to put new wine into old bottles. He uses all the types already in existence, devotional story, religious *exemplum*, fable, epilogue and *fabliau*, but shows his outstanding merit by his humanity, versatility and humour, which are inexhaustible, as well as by his ripe and mellow presentation of character, clear, rounded and complete, his rich description, pointed comment, lyrical feeling and well-wrought plot.

Between Chaucer and the Elizabethans the short story languished in England, except for the translation of the *Gesta Romanorum*, two tales by Lydgate and a few by Occleve, but flourished in Scotland, where Robert Henryson succeeded to the reputation won by Chaucer as a teller of short stories. His *Testament of Cresseid* is full of a tender pathos rarely equalled and never excelled in story-telling, and his quaint, simple, rhythmic, delicately-constructed *Fables* are a noteworthy contribution to the class of literature we are considering, combining a little of the didactic with a great deal of the flavour and atmosphere of the story told for pleasure.

After the fifteenth century narrative drifted to prose, except for the ballads which kept alive the short tale in verse, but the early prose works like Berner's *Froissart* and Malory's *Morte d'Arthur* were works of great length, though some critics have classed them, with some amount of justification, as collections of short stories. But in Italy the Renaissance produced a new kind of short story known as the *novella*, which is best represented by the tales of Boccaccio's *Decameron*. The *novella* was brief, pungent and varied in character. It was soon imitated in France, where it appeared as the *conte*, and later in Elizabethan England, where it took on a character in

keeping with the race and time, being encumbered with a great deal of moralising, classical learning and rhetoric, and occasionally with Puritan propaganda. Painter, Green, Deloney, Ford, Fenton, Rich and others produced collections which were enormously popular. Rich's *Farewell to Militarie Profession* was "forged onely for delight" and certainly achieves its object as a careful reading of "Antonius and Silvio," given in this volume, will show, while another Elizabethan story which immediately follows shows how Thomas Deloney, the silk weaver, made real literature out of simple stories of the common people. The Euphuists, especially Pettie, Green, and Lyly, also used the short story for the exhibition of their artificial and tedious method of writing.

By the end of the sixteenth century the Italian *novella* had perished under an overweight of extraneous matter, and its place had been taken in popular regard by the long pompous romance, the short essay such as those of Bacon, or the "characters" of Sir Thomas Overbury, who revived a literary form of Theophrastus and Lucian. With regard to story writing the pens of English writers now needed more room, and we come to the birth of the novel. It was necessary for themes and characters to be worked out in full detail before narrative could be once more cultivated in miniature.

During the late seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries the novel was developing in size and quality, and the short story was comparatively neglected; but Defoe, Addison, Steele, Sterne, Hawkesworth and Goldsmith tried their hands at this form of narration, the first named exhibiting in the tale here given, viz., "In Defence of His Right," many of the characteristics of the modern story, while the example selected from Hawkesworth's work is of special interest, as it shows the writer striving to cast off the classical shackles of his time and break into a freer mode of expression. Goldsmith is a stylist of a much higher order, but he still adheres in the example given to the formal style of the Johnsonian epoch.

In the early part of the nineteenth century the short story is a poor thing from the point of view of form, but many examples abound, and this type of literature was so very popular that a good number of examples have been chosen in order to show the taste of the period; while the examples taken from the works of De Quincey and Rossetti are included to show how these two masters of romantic mysticism deal with the short narrative. The later decades of the nineteenth

century saw the full development and fruition of the short tale. We have lost some of the romantic atmosphere of the old romance, the aroma of the old chronicles, and folk-lore, the ballad and the story poem, but we have gained greatly in power of delicate delineation, characterisation and what might be called focus. More than this, we have gained in rightness of vision, if at times it be too conscious, and we have more of spiritual outlook and discernment. Nor do the best modern examples of the short story show any decline in imaginative power and creativeness, for such stories as are written by W. H. Hudson, Joseph Conrad and Walter de la Mare set the mind roaming in mystic realms that have a spiritual foundation which had no counterpart in the earlier stories. An endeavour has been made to render the modern examples as varied as possible, and the critic will of course remember, that copyright considerations have shut out some of the finest products in this department of literature.

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ENGLISH SHORT STORIES

THE GREEN KNIGHT TRADITIONAL

I

WHEN Arthur was King of Britain, and so reigned, it befell one winter-tide he held at Camelot his Christmas feast, with all the knights of the Round Table, full fifteen days. All was joy then in hall and chamber; and when the New Year came, it was kept with great joy. Rich gifts were given and many lords and ladies took their seats at the table, where Queen Guenever sat at the king's side, and a lady fairer of form might no one say he had ever before seen. But King Arthur would not eat nor would he long sit, until he should have witnessed some wondrous adventure. The first course was served with a blowing of trumpets, and before each two guests were set twelve dishes and bright wine, for there was no want of anything.

Scarcely had the first course commenced, when there rushed in at the hall-door a knight,—the tallest on earth he must have been. His back and breast were broad, but his waist was small. He was clothed entirely in green, and his spurs were of bright gold; his saddle was embroidered with birds and flies, and the steed that he rode upon was green. Gaily was the knight attired; his great beard, like a green bush, hung on his breast. His horse's mane was decked with golden threads, and its tail bound with a green band; such a horse and such a knight were never before seen. It seemed that no man might endure the Green Knight's blows, but he carried neither spear nor shield. In one hand he held a holly bough, and in the other an axe, the edge of which was as keen as a sharp razor, and the handle was encased in iron, curiously graven with green.

Thus arrayed, the Green Knight entered the hall, without saluting anyone, and asked for the governor of the company, and looked about him for the most renowned of them. Much they marvelled to see a man and a horse as green as grass; never before had they seen such a sight as this; they were afraid to answer, and were as silent as if sleep had taken hold of them, some from fear, others from courtesy. King Arthur, who was never afraid, saluted the Green Knight, and bade him welcome. The Green Knight said that he would not tarry; he was seeking the most valiant, that he might prove him. He came in peace; but he had a halberd at home and a helmet too. King Arthur assured him that he should not fail to find an opponent worthy of him.

"I seek no fight," said the knight; "here are only beardless children; here is no man to match me; still, if any be bold enough to strike a stroke for another, this axe shall be his, but I shall give him a stroke in return within a twelvemonth and a day!"

Fear kept all silent; while the knight rolled his red eyes about and bent his gristly green brows. Waving his beard awhile, he exclaimed:

"What, then—is this Arthur's Court? Forsooth, the renown of the Round Table is overturned with a word of one man's speech!"

Arthur grew red for shame, and waxed as wroth as the wind. He assured the knight that no one was afraid of his great words, and seized the axe. The Green Knight, stroking his beard, awaited the blow, and with a dry countenance drew down his green coat.

But thereupon Sir Gawayne begged the king to let him undertake the blow; he asked permission to leave the table, saying it was not meet that Arthur should take the game, while so many bold knights sat upon bench. Although the weakest, he was quite ready to meet the Green Knight. The other knights too begged Arthur to "give Gawayne the game." Then the king gave Gawayne, who was his nephew, his weapon and told him to keep heart and hand steady. The Green Knight inquired the name of his opponent, and Sir Gawayne told him his name, declaring that he was willing to give and receive a blow.

"It pleases me well, Sir Gawayne," says the Green Knight, "that I shall receive a blow from thy fist; but thou must swear that thou wilt seek me to receive the blow in return."

"Where shall I seek thee?" says Sir Gawayne; "tell me thy name and thy abode and I will find thee."

"When thou hast smitten me," says the Green Knight, "then tell I thee of my home and name; if I speak not at all, so much the better for thee. Take now thy grim weapon and let us see how thou strikest?"

"Gladly, sir, forsooth," quoth Sir Gawayne.

And now the Green Knight puts his long, green locks aside, and lays bare his neck, and Sir Gawayne strikes hard with the axe, and at one blow severs the head from the body. The head falls to the earth, and many treat it roughly, but the Green Knight never falters; he starts up, seizes his head, steps into the saddle, holding the while the head in his hand by the hair, and turns his horse about. Then lo! the head lifts up its eyelids, and addresses Sir Gawayne:

"Look thou, be ready to go as thou hast promised, and seek till thou findest me. Get thee to the Green Chapel, there to receive a blow on New Year's morn; fail thou never; come, or recreant be called." So saying, the Green Knight rides out of the hall, his head in his hand.

And now Arthur addresses the queen: "Dear dame, be not dismayed; such marvels well become the Christmas festival; I may now go to meat. Sir Gawayne, hang up thine axe." The king and his knights sit feasting at the board, with all manner of meat and minstrelsy, till day is ended.

"But beware, Sir Gawayne!" said the king at its end, "lest thou fail to seek the adventure which thou hast taken in hand!"

II

LIKE other years, the months and seasons of this year pass away full quickly and never return. After Christmas comes Lent, and spring sets in, and warm showers descend. Then the groves become green; and birds build and sing for joy of the summer that follows; blossoms begin to bloom, and noble notes are heard in the woods. With the soft winds of summer, more beautiful grow the flowers, wet with dew-drops. But then harvest approaches, and drives the dust about, and the leaves drop off the trees, the grass becomes grey, and all ripens and rots. At last, when the winter winds come round again, Sir Gawayne thinks of his dread journey, and his vow to the Green Knight.

On All-Hallow's Day, Arthur makes a feast for his nephew's sake. After meat, Sir Gawayne thus speaks to his uncle: "Now, liege lord, I ask leave of you, for I am bound on the morrow to seek the Green Knight."

Many noble knights, the best of the Court, counsel and comfort him, and much sorrow prevails in the hall, but Gawayne declares that he has nothing to fear. On the morn he asks for his arms; a carpet is spread on the floor, and he steps thereon. He is dubbed in a doublet of Tarsic silk, and a well-made hood; they set steel shoes on his feet, lap his legs in steel greaves; put on the steel habergeon, the well-burnished braces, elbow pieces, and gloves of plate: while over all is placed the coat armour. His spurs are then fixed, and his sword is attached to his side by a silken girdle. Thus attired the knight hears mass, and afterwards takes leave of Arthur and his Court. By that time his horse Gringolet was ready, the harness of which glittered like the gleam of the sun. Then Sir Gawayne sets his helmet upon his head, and the circle around it was decked with diamonds; and they give him his shield with the "pentangle" of pure gold, devised by King Solomon as a token of truth; for it is called the endless knot, and well becomes the good Sir Gawayne, a knight the truest of speech and the fairest of form. He was found faultless in his five wits; the image of the Virgin was depicted upon his shield; in courtesy he was never found wanting, and therefore was the endless knot fastened on his shield.

And now Sir Gawayne seizes his lance and bids all "Good-day"; he spurs his horse and goes on his way. All that saw him go, mourned in their hearts, and declared that his equal was not to be found upon earth. It would have been better for him to have been a leader of men, than to die by the hands of an elvish man.

Meanwhile, many a weary mile goes Sir Gawayne; now rides the knight through the realms of England; he has no companion but his horse, and no men does he see till he approaches North Wales. From Holyhead he passes into Wirral, where he finds but few that love God or man; he inquires after the Green Knight of the Green Chapel, but can gain no tidings of him. His cheer oft changed before he found the chapel; many a cliff he climbed over, many a ford and stream he crossed, and everywhere he found a foe. It were too tedious to tell the tenth part of his adventures with serpents, wolves and wild men; with bulls, bears and boars. Had he not been both brave and

good, doubtless he had been dead; the sharp winter was far worse than any war that ever troubled him. Thus in peril he travels till Christmas Eve and on the morn he finds himself in a deep forest, where were old oaks many a hundred; and many sad birds upon bare twigs piped piteously for the cold. Through rough ways and deep mire he goes, that he may celebrate the birth of Christ and blessing himself he says, "Cross of Christ, speed me!"

Scarcely had he blessed himself thrice, than he saw a dwelling in the wood, set on a hill, the comeliest castle that knight ever owned, which shone as the sun through the bright oaks.

Forthwith Sir Gawayne goes to the chief gate, and finds the drawbridge raised, and the gates fast shut; as he abides there on the bank, he observes the high walls of hard hewn stone, with battlements and towers and chalk-white chimneys; and bright and great were its round towers with their well-made capitals. Oh, thinks he, if only he might come within the cloister. Anon he calls, and soon there comes a porter to know the knight's errand.

"Good sir," says Gawayne, "ask the high lord of this house to grant me a lodging."

"You are welcome to dwell here as long as you like," replied the porter. Thereupon is the drawbridge let down, and the gate opened wide to receive him; and he enters and his horse is well stabled, and knights and squires bring Gawayne into the hall. Many a one hastens to take his helmet and sword; the lord of the castle bids him welcome and they embrace each other. Gawayne looks on his host; a big bold one he seemed; beaver-hued was his broad beard, and his face as fell as the fire.

The lord then leads Gawayne to a chamber, and assigns a page to wait upon him. In this bright bower was noble bedding; the curtains were of pure silk with golden hems, and Tarsic tapestries covered the walls and floor. Here the knight doffed his armour, and put on rich robes, which well became him: and in troth a more comely knight than Sir Gawayne was never seen.

Then a chair was placed by the fireplace for him, and a mantle of fine linen, richly embroidered, thrown over him; a table, too, was brought in, and the knight, having washed, was invited to sit to meat. He was served with numerous dishes, with fish baked and broiled, or boiled and seasoned with spices; full noble feast, and much mirth did he make, as he ate and drank,

Then Sir Gawayne, in answer to his host, told him he was of Arthur's Court; and when this was made known, great was the joy in the hall. Each one said softly to his mate: "Now we shall see courteous manners and hear noble speech, for we have amongst us the father of all nurture."

After dinner, the company go to the chapel, to hear the evensong of the great season. The lord of the castle and Sir Gawayne sit together during the service. When his wife, accompanied by her maids, left her seat after the service, she appeared even fairer than Guenever. An older dame led her by the hand, and very unlike they were; for if the young one was fair the other was yellow, and had rough and wrinkled cheeks. The younger had a throat fairer than snow; the elder had black brows and bleared lips. With permission of the lord, Sir Gawayne salutes the elder, and the younger courteously kisses, and begs to be her servant. To the great hall then they go, where spices and wine are served: the lord takes off his hood, and places it on a spear: he who makes most mirth that Christmas-tide is to win it.

On Christmas morn, joy reigns in every dwelling in the world; so did it in the castle where Sir Gawayne now abode. The lord and the old ancient wife sit together, and Sir Gawayne sits by the wife of his host; it were too tedious to tell of the meat, the mirth, and the joy that abounded everywhere. Trumpets and horns give forth their merry notes, and great was the joy for three days.

St John's Day was the last day of the Christmas festival, and on the morrow many of the guests took their departure from the castle. Its lord thanked Sir Gawayne for the honour and pleasure of his visit, and endeavoured to keep him at his court. He desired also to know what had driven Sir Gawayne from Arthur's Court before the end of the Christmas holidays?

Sir Gawayne replied that "a high errand and a hasty one" had forced him to leave the Court. Then he asked his host whether he had ever heard of the Green Chapel? For there he had to be on New Year's Day, and he would as lief die as fail in his errand. The prince tells Sir Gawayne he will teach him the way, and that the Green Chapel is not more than two miles from the castle. Then was Gawayne glad, and he consented to tarry awhile at the castle; and its lord and castellan rejoiced too, and sent to ask the ladies to come and entertain their guest. And he asked Sir Gawayne to grant him one request that he would keep his chamber on the morrow's morn, as he