

LECTED ENGLISH
SHORT STORIES

(NINETEENTH CENTURY)

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

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THE SHORT STORY IN ENGLISH

'WHATEVER men do' is a phrase which describes the theme of the story-teller as well as that of the satirist. The most universal of human interests is the interest of man in his brother man. We should expect this universal interest to manifest itself early, and to do so first in a direct and simple rather than in an indirect and critical fashion. And this is what we actually find. The literary critic can with reasonable accuracy trace the rise of satire; but who shall assign an origin to the story? Even the higher criticism would place *Genesis*—comparatively speaking—fairly near the beginning of things; and *Genesis* contains some of the finest tales ever penned. When the curtain rises on the literature of Greece, it reveals an *Iliad* and an *Odyssey*, each of which is a long story skilfully woven out of many short tales. So, again, when light breaks through the darkness of the North, it discloses that great collection of the heroic legends of Scandinavia, the *Edda*; and when our own branch of the Teutonic race migrated from the Continent, among the furniture it deemed too precious to be left behind was, apparently, the group of legends from which sprang *Beowulf*. That Celtic race which these Teutons found in possession of the land had its own heroic myths, the modern forms of which point back to a past far beyond the dawn of authentic, or

at least of written history ; and the differences between these two groups of stories have furnished part of the foundation for those theories of Teutonism on the one hand and of Celticism on the other, which, after having pervaded history and criticism for the last half-century, are now seriously threatened by the newer anthropology.

The story, then, is very old, and from its appearance at the dawn of literature the inference might be drawn that there can be no great difficulty in telling it. But such an inference would be unsound. It is only by comparison that *Genesis* stands near the beginning of things ; and if there is anything certain in literary criticism it is that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are the fine fruit of a very long process of development. Evolution has taught us to think in millenniums instead of decades. And while it is true that the story is, or may be, simple, it is a profound mistake to suppose that it can be effectively told by any one and without art. In truth, literary simplicity is one of the most difficult of all things to attain, though the non-literary variety is within the reach of the dullest. It was the latter that Shakespeare ridiculed in *Dame Quickly*, and Johnson in his well-known parody of the ballad style :

I put my hat upon my head
And walked into the Strand,
And there I met another man,
With his hat in his hand.

But probably more poets have rivalled the Wordsworth of the *Ode on Intimations of Immortality* than have rivalled the Wordsworth of *Michael*. Further, simplicity is in no way inconsistent with the extremest

depth of poignancy, a depth attainable only by the profoundest students of the human heart. It is a story of childlike simplicity that leads up to that 'great and exceeding bitter cry' of Esau, which has echoed through every century since it was uttered.

While, however, the short story as a form of literature is of immemorial antiquity, that particular type of it with which we have here to deal, namely, the short story told in prose and in the English language, is of quite recent growth. In the main it is an affair of the nineteenth century, and the very beginnings of it—apart from translations and adaptations—cannot be traced back much farther than the age of Elizabeth. For *Beowulf* is an epic in verse, and Chaucer, the first great story-teller who was English in the modern sense of the word, likewise used verse as his medium. It is true, Chaucer intersperses among his vivid and racy stories in verse the prose *Tale of Meliboeus* and *The Parson's Tale*, but these are not original, and they are anything but lively. Chaucer's only rival in those early days, the author of *The Friars of Berwick*, likewise wrote in verse. The early tales of both the Scandinavian and the Germanic branches of the Teutonic family are in verse. The poetic *Edda* precedes the prose *Edda*, and it was in verse that the Germans celebrated Arminius and other early heroes of their race. Herein certainly English literature has developed on Teutonic and not on Celtic lines; for the Celts seem to have used prose in their tales more freely and at a date relatively earlier than either the Teutonic or the Graeco-Italic peoples. In English the earliest great name in the history of prose fiction is that of Malory.

But though the *Morte d'Arthur* is a great possession, and though it contains an element, probably considerable, of original matter, it is still, in essence, an adaptation from the French. In that language the short story was already firmly rooted. It had been still longer and was still more deeply rooted in Italian. These were the sources from which in Elizabethan times it was transplanted into English. At first we find simply translation. That great storehouse of plots for the use of the dramatist, Painter's *Palace of Pleasure* (1566-7), is compiled from the resources supplied by Boccaccio, Bandello, Margaret of Navarre, and others. But ten years later, in *The Petite Pallace of Pettie his Pleasure*, as Professor Atkins points out,¹ we find occasional additions made by the translator to the original; and five years later still, 'of the eight stories which make up *Rich his Farewell to the Militarie Profession* (1581), while three are taken from the Italian, the remaining five are frankly "forged onely for delight".'

Thus original prose fiction was at last established in England and in the English language. It had its birth somewhat before the date last mentioned. Critics are now generally agreed that *Euphues* is the earliest English novel; and the first part of *Euphues* was published in 1578. The wonder is that the development was so long delayed, for there are numerous indications that the popular appetite for tales was so keen that it might fairly be called voracious. There was, therefore, plenty of stimulus to invention. One indication of this appetite is the success of translations like

¹ *Cambridge History of English Literature*, iii, 343.

those of Painter and Fenton ; another is the fact that men like Greene, who made a precarious living by the pen, found it worth their while to write similar tales. But one reason for the late development may at once be assigned. It is that the skill necessary to produce either the short tale, or that longer sort of tale which we now call a novel, did not exist. Highly gifted as the Elizabethans were, they had not this particular sort of talent. To say that English prose was still unformed is certainly insufficient, and is only partially true. Painter does well enough, and Malory and Berners do brilliantly well, when they are working on materials supplied by others. When it comes to invention, Lyly flounders hopelessly, and others, like Greene and Nash, achieve only an occasional and partial success. *Euphues* no doubt has merits which at one time were denied to it ; but more than enough has of late been made of those merits, and, such as they are, they are certainly not merits of construction. The story is naught. The simple truth is, that far the greater part of *original* English prose of the Elizabethan age can now be read with enjoyment only by the few who have steeped themselves in the spirit of the time. And this means, as those few are apt to forget, that the prose in question falls a long way short of greatness. No such preparation is needed for the enjoyment of North's *Plutarch*, or of Malory, or Berners. These men are saved through the guidance of the great artists whom they translated, or whose materials they worked up. The same holds true of poetry. For the enjoyment of Shakespeare we need no preparation, except such training of soul

and mind as will suffice for the comprehension of greatness of any age from Adam downwards. But for the enjoyment of the minor dramatists some special preparation is needed; and the preparation must be extensive in inverse proportion to the stature of the dramatist. Hence we may formulate a useful rule for discriminating between what is assuredly great, and what is only more or less dubiously so. The assuredly great is never caviare to the general; while the critic who rediscovers greatness that for some reason has gone out of fashion and sunk into oblivion had better consider carefully the terms in which he proclaims his discovery. It was some weakness in the writer that caused the oblivion: if he had been great *enough*, he would never have been forgotten. The writer whom the critic has discovered may not be wholly insignificant, but that he is not a demigod is certain, and that he is not a giant is in the highest degree probable. The possibilities involved in such a cataclysm as the overthrow of Rome by the barbarians are incalculable; but, such cases excepted, the rule here laid down will be found trustworthy.

Now in this predicament Elizabethan prose fiction stands. It is a rediscovery; the world had forgotten all about it; but the revival of interest in Elizabethan poetry which accompanied the modern revival of romance, led to a renewed interest in the prose foundations on which much of that poetry, in its dramatic form, rested. It was found that there were storehouses of materials, partly original, largely borrowed, from which the dramatists had drawn. Antiquaries set to work to edit rare tracts or print forgotten manuscripts,

and critics followed in their steps to appraise them. Both fell into the mistake of exaggerating the importance of their discoveries. Nothing that they found can be ranked either in the first class or in the second. What they did establish was that stories in considerable number and of considerable bulk in the aggregate were produced by the Elizabethan writers, and that these writers were the pioneers of prose fiction in English as well as of the English drama. They showed, further, that this prose fiction was tolerably varied as well as extensive. The short story and the novel, romance and realism, were all represented. Lyly has already been mentioned as the first novelist, or rather as the writer of the first novel, for he hardly knew what he was doing; Greene may be taken as the best representative of romance; and Nash as representative of the picaresque writers. There was much talent and some genius in their work. Yet in the main it failed. Its highest praise is that part of it was built into the fabric of the drama. Shakespeare, as is well known, used Lodge's *Rosalynd* for *As You Like It*, and Greene's *Pandosto* for the *Winter's Tale*; but whoever turns back from the plays to the sources will find there the story without the glamour of genius, and in consequence will be apt to think the story rather commonplace.

Vigorous as it appeared for a few years, the plant of Elizabethan prose fiction soon withered away. The cause was partly the extraordinary success of the drama: the story enacted on the stage was more popular than the story read in the closet. Partly, no doubt, it lay in the defects of the story-tellers. They had no clear end in view. They did not understand

the limits of their medium, prose, or the conditions of its use. Greene, for instance, encumbered himself with all the weight of euphuism. He increased the load by undertaking to point a moral before he had learnt to tell a plain tale. Of adornment his tales have only too much. He interrupts his narrative to preach, he thinks to impart variety by digression—an error serious in every kind of narrative, and fatal in short stories. Though he claimed to be learned, he has more anachronisms than Shakespeare. In *Penelope's Web*, which introduces the wife of Ulysses and her attendants, the women speak of Anacreon, Menander, and Ovid. What is far worse is the fact that Greene violates that appropriateness to character which Shakespeare observes while he flings chronology to the winds. Thus, in the same piece, the old Nurse expresses her surprise 'that Romans who covet to surpass the Grecians in all honourable and virtuous action, did not see into their own folly, when they erect temples unto Flora'—a speech hardly more fit for her mouth than it would be for that of the Nurse in *Romeo and Juliet*.

Only a few of Greene's romances can be called short stories. *Mamillia*, which fills a considerable volume, goes beyond the limit. Even *Menaphon* and *Pandosto* are upon the confines. But *Penelope's Web* and *Perimedes the Black-Smith* both contain short stories properly so called, and it is only want of skill in construction and want of precision of purpose that prevent Greene from ranking as a story-teller still to be reckoned with.

Greene occasionally crossed the space which divides romance from realism; Nash was a realist by habit

and preference. But Nash has little to do with the history of the short story. The satirical portraits which he drew with no small skill belong to a different category, and *The Unfortunate Traveller, or the Life of Jack Wilton* (1594), by virtue of which he ranks as the forerunner of Defoe, is a long story rather than a short one, and, like the picaresque tales in general, is destitute of construction. The man who came nearest to success in this particular form was one who was older in years but younger in the art than they. If Thomas Deloney was born, as is supposed, in 1543, he lived to the good old age of fifty-six or fifty-seven, instead of the thirty years or so which bounded the lives of so many of his literary companions. He was far past the latter limit before he entered upon a literary career. He drifted from silk-weaving into ballad-writing, but he seems not to have made letters his profession much before 1586. Most of his verse is sad doggerel. The prose narratives, with which alone we are concerned, were all produced during the last three or four years of his life. Deloney was not only more mature than his rivals, but, writing after them, he had the advantage of their example and experience to guide him. *The Gentle Craft*, a collection of stories relating to the craft of the shoemaker, is decidedly the best book of its kind that we owe to the Elizabethans. *Jack of Newbury* and *Thomas of Reading* have somewhat more the character, and approach nearer to the dimensions, of novels; yet they, too, are in the main groups of stories loosely strung together on the thread of a central character. In all of them Deloney shows greater skill in construction than any of his rivals, his characters are better drawn, his

humour is richer, his wit less strained. The cause of his success was that he was content to tell a plain story plainly, drawing from his own experience and depicting men and women whom he knew. It is true he is not without his affectations. Quaint and incongruous fragments of euphuism and tags of romance remind the reader of the age to which he belonged. But in the main he is free from the strained ingenuities and far-fetched conceits which are so wearisome in his contemporaries. He is essentially a realist, and, like the giant of old, he has gained strength by contact with mother-earth. He probably gains, too, by the very absence of poetry from his nature, as Lyly and Greene were led astray by its presence.

The short story seemed, then, to be on the point of success. It was really on the verge of eclipse. When Deloney died in 1600, the short story passed into a state of suspended animation, from which it was destined, indeed, to be revived but not through the influence of the Elizabethan story-tellers. The break between them and their modern successors is complete. The most potent cause of this eclipse was probably the overwhelming success of the drama. Deloney's stories might have held their ground against the stiffness of *Gorboduc* and the crudity of *Gammer Gurton's Needle*. But just about the time when Deloney abandoned silk-weaving for ballad-making Shakespeare migrated from Stratford to London, and when the former died the latter was in mid-career. *Jack of Newbury* and *The Gentle Craft* are nearly contemporaneous with *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*. Ben Jonson, Webster, Massinger, Beaumont, and Fletcher, were all to come.

To their blaze the light of poor Deloney was as a farthing rushlight to the sun.

The eclipse was of long duration. Until the Puritans closed the theatres, the drama maintained the ascendancy it had won, and afterwards the energy which might have gone to the creation of stories was largely absorbed in polemics, political and religious. Such literary talent as was still artistically disinterested devoted itself to the delineation of characters rather than to narration. It was Overbury, not Deloney, who left successors. Somewhat later Bunyan proved himself to be an unsurpassed story-teller; but his religious allegories stand apart. It is not till we reach the eighteenth century that we find anything 'to the purpose; and in the early part even of the eighteenth century we find rather promise than performance. Swift unquestionably possessed the gift of story-telling, but he made narrative merely the vehicle of his satire. So did his friend Arbuthnot. And while *Robinson Crusoe* is conclusive proof of Defoe's mastership, both it and his picaresque stories are among the *incunabula* of the novel, not of the short story. The periodical paper, as created and developed by Steele and Addison, seemed to be a promising medium for the publication of short stories; and in their dreams and allegories these writers approached the verge of the tale, as in the De Coverley papers they all but made a novel. But in both cases what they gave was rather hints and suggestions than the thing itself. Nevertheless, the medium they created was as good for the tale as it was for the essay of manners and society, and in due time the tale was born anew. Not, however, until after the

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birth of the novel. It might have been expected *a priori* that story-tellers would work up from small to great. In point of fact they did the opposite, and when *Tom Jones* was published hardly a beginning had been made with the short story. The first of the periodicals in which stories were a conspicuous feature was *The Adventurer*, and to its conductor, Hawkesworth, must be assigned the credit of this development. Even in *The Adventurer* the tale was used in a tentative way, as if Hawkesworth thought that it required some justification other than its merit as a tale. Each of his stories embodies some moral and inculcates a lesson. This affords great comfort to the conscientious Nathan Drake, who praises the story of *Amurath*, perhaps Hawkesworth's masterpiece, because 'its instructive tendency is so great, its imagery and incidents are so ingeniously appropriate, that few compilers for youth have omitted to avail themselves of the lesson'. The tale is a good one, but the praise, though deserved, will probably be felt at the present time to be a dubious recommendation. Since the days of *Sandford and Merton* compilers for youth have learnt to be less direct in their methods. The moral pill is now more thickly coated with the sugar of adventure and incident. *Amurath* is, as the name indicates, an Eastern tale; and this was the sort which Hawkesworth particularly affected. He was conscious, however, of the advantage of variety; indeed, the search for variety is the most notable feature of his conduct of *The Adventurer*. Accordingly we find tales of English life as well as tales of the East. The one feature common to all is that they have invariably that 'instructive tendency', which

was so pleasing to the conscience of Drake, however the natural man in him may have delighted in story pure and simple. And Drake's criticism is important, not because it expresses his own opinion, but because it is a deduction from the actual practice of the eighteenth-century story-tellers ; it was either *their* opinion, or the opinion which they felt themselves obliged to adopt.

Hawkesworth's innovation proved to be popular, and his example was followed in several of the periodical essays subsequent to *The Adventurer*. By far the greatest of those who in this respect imitated him was Oliver Goldsmith, whose *Asem, an Eastern Tale : or a Vindication of the Wisdom of Providence in the Moral Government of the World*, is exactly in the manner of Hawkesworth. It has the same Eastern setting and the same 'instructive tendency'. But it has also the beauty of style which enabled Goldsmith to adorn all he touched, and in addition to that it has a force and depth of thought which deserve the attention of those who accept the 'inspired idiot' theory with regard to its author. *The Adventures of a Strolling Player* shows that Goldsmith could tell another kind of tale as well.

After Goldsmith the periodical essay was moribund ; but the tale was doomed to no second Rip Van Winkle sleep. For now not the drama but prose fiction was becoming the dominant form of literature, and prose had shaken itself free from poetic tradition and influence. Thanks to the Queen Anne writers, the secret of a lucid and simple structure of sentence was attainable by any one who would take a little trouble.

Through two centuries of experience and effort the limits of what was possible, or of what it was expedient to attempt, had been more or less determined. Hence the revival of romance produced no such result as had followed in the wake of the earlier romance. The Elizabethan romancer rambled where he pleased. He could not deny himself the pleasure of producing an effect which seemed to him good in itself. His successor of the later eighteenth century, generally a less richly gifted man, had a keener eye to business and a sounder sense of what was relevant, and therefore effective, because not merely good in itself, but good in its setting. Lyly had a richer mind than Mrs. Radcliffe, but *The Mysteries of Udolpho* is, as a story, incomparably better than *Euphues*—than which, indeed, nothing could well be worse. The indispensable conditions of the art had at last been learnt; there were Englishmen who combined with the power to tell stories with effect, the will to tell them for their own sake, and no longer for their ‘instructive tendency’.

One of the difficulties of the short story had hitherto been that of publication. The tale was not a thing that could stand alone, as it were. The long story, the novel, had, naturally, a substantive existence of its own: it was a book. The short story required support. This had not been so great a difficulty in the earlier days of frequent and multifarious tracts and pamphlets. But that mode of publication had long ceased to be one that was favourable to the prospects of a short story. ‘Burning questions’ could be discussed, because readers were drawn by the blaze and heat; but the short story had no such power of attraction. The

periodical, as Steele and Addison and their successors understood it, might have afforded the solution of the difficulty; but, as we have seen, it was now itself in decay. Its decay was, however, coincident with the rise of another species of periodical, which has supplied just the medium necessary for the short story. The 'magazine', by its very name, indicates a scope and a variety which were never aimed at by *The Tatler*, *The Spectator*, or *The Rambler*. Already *The Gentleman's Magazine* illustrated that variety, and the day was approaching when the periodicals similarly varied were destined to multiply beyond the dreams of an earlier time. There is the closest connexion between the development of this class of periodicals and the short story. They have acted and reacted upon one another, and each has been in turn cause and effect of the increase of the other. The more magazines the more need of stories to fill them, and the more stories the wider the demand for magazines. It is therefore a fact of the first importance in the history of the story that, while *The Tatler* and *The Spectator* were fading into *The Mirror* and *The Lounger* and *The Looker-on*, and these in turn into *The Ruminator*, *The Reasoner*, *The Moderator*, and *The Spy*, about which few people know more than they learn from the industrious Drake, there sprang into being that other periodical literature of more diversified contents which has since grown to such astonishing proportions. The earlier periodical was the nurse of the essay. The periodical of our own day nourishes it still, but with a difference. We rather like our essay to be solid, to embody facts, to be useful; and the light play of Addison scarcely reaches

our standard of utility. Men have been known to think that poetry itself would be much more satisfactory if it only proved something, and even poets have been known to give them some excuse by professing to 'justify' something to something else. In this respect the modern magazine is less literary than the eighteenth-century periodical. But there seems to be a law of compensation at work; for, *per contra*, the story, which the modern magazine nourishes also, now needs to be nothing but a story. It requires no longer to be written with one eye upon the tale and the other upon the 'compilers for youth'. The imagery and incidents have to be ingeniously appropriate to nothing but the story itself. It is a blessed emancipation. It is the final and indispensable step which alone can make literature fully and emphatically literary.

'I'll larn ye for bein' a toad,' is the exclamation of the little boy who feels himself an instrument of divine vengeance in beating the poor ugly creature to death. The rigid moralist who prides himself on being nothing but a moralist, and who is hardly more competent to judge than is the little boy to be the agent of omnipotence, would 'larn' all literature that does not carry its moral on the surface 'for bein' literary'. To him it is ugly; and with ludicrous inconsistency he, who cares nothing for beauty, acts on the principle that ugliness is the unpardonable sin. He might seem to be negligible; but he is not, he has repeatedly been a power in the land. He has imposed his principle on every form of literature in turn. Milton himself was influenced by it. Wordsworth ruined much of his work by his determination to be a teacher. Not that