

MODERN ENGLISH SHORT STORIES

1930-1955

Selected and introduced
by Derek Hudson



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DEREK HUDSON

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Introduction

MOST of the stories in the first two volumes of *Selected English Short Stories** were written in the nineteenth century, and many of their authors were American. In his book *The Modern Short Story* (1941) Mr. H. E. Bates used this fact to emphasize 'the poverty of the short story' in nineteenth-century England. Mr. Bates did not mean that the Victorians were not eager readers and writers of the short story; their interest was sustained by an army of magazines which published innumerable stories, often with a domestic flavour, which were illustrated by woodcuts of a sentimental, improving nature and were especially looked for at Christmas time. But it is true that, for the greater part of the nineteenth century, the short stories of England were more conspicuous in quantity than in quality. Even such eminent novelists as Scott, Dickens, Thackeray, and Meredith failed, when writing on a smaller scale, to show that they had any clear view of the short story as an art-form in its own right. Mrs. Gaskell is respectfully remembered; but about her lesser competitors—as about the cobwebby bundles of Victorian magazines in our attics which contain so many of their earnest attempts—there lingers an unmistakable suspicion of dry rot.

Meanwhile, across the Atlantic, Irving, Hawthorne, Poe, Melville, Bret Harte, Crane, and Bierce were pouring out stories that were destined to be fruitful in their influence on English writers. These Americans brought to their developing art a mastery of construction, a terseness and clarity of expression, that gave them authority. They taught the lesson that the success of a story depends on atmosphere, on the instilling into a reader of a mood of almost hypnotic attention. There was to be no room for verbiage or pomposity, none of the

* Published in three volumes in *The World's Classics* in 1914, 1921, and 1927.

novel-reader's indulgence for creaking machinery; each stroke had to be directed to the total effect.

Towards the end of the century the American example began to show appreciable results on this side of the ocean in the stories of R. L. Stevenson, George Moore, Oscar Wilde and the contributors to the *Yellow Book* and the *Savoy*. American short-story writers had demonstrated the possibilities of the art; they had aroused a spirit of emulation. Theirs were not, of course, by any means the sole influences that affected the English writers of the nineties or their immediate successors such as Wells, Conrad, Bennett, Kipling, and Maugham. Many imaginations were stirred by Poe and Bierce; but in England our homespun tradition was transformed by the massive contrasting powers of Tolstoy and Chekhov, by the attacking force of Maupassant, and, most notably, by the precision and poetic delicacy of Turgenev and Flaubert. In 1914 a book of short stories by James Joyce, *Dubliners*, began to exercise a similar spell. These were giants whose presence is still perceptible in the background of this volume of *Modern English Short Stories*.

And yet it is largely owing to the original American impetus—the 'lend-lease' of a century ago—that we have been able in this volume and its predecessor to dispense, though not ungratefully, with American aid. For the past fifty years an English school of short-story writers has flourished. The aims and achievements of its members have been most various. The honour-boards commemorate the bitter poetry of D. H. Lawrence alongside the mordant humour of Saki and the irony of Maugham; Stacy Aumonier (perhaps our English O. Henry) is remembered beside H. E. Bates and Elizabeth Bowen whose tender re-creation of landscape and atmosphere owe as much to Turgenev as to Chekhov. The present volume adds such names as Virginia Woolf (a potent influence on several of her fellow contributors), V. S. Pritchett, Graham Greene, Eric Linklater, Rosamond Lehmann, C. S. Forester, William Sansom, Fred Urquhart, A. L. Barker, and Nigel Kneale, all of whom have produced work that is noticeably individual. It is one of the pleasures of the short story that it gives opportunities to writers of refinement who will never be among the 'big guns' of literature. Frances Towers, for example,

was not a prolific writer and spent years working in the Bank of England. Her special qualities of grace and intuition were first widely appreciated in her posthumous *Tea with Mr. Rochester*. Yet her death in 1948 meant a distinct loss to English letters.

The modern short-story writer has had to steer between the Scylla of popular journalism and the Charybdis of preciosity. It has seemed, at times during the past twenty-five years, that some of our most distinguished writers were bent on establishing an era of plotlessness which might drive the intellectual short story out of the reach even of a 'general reader' sympathetically disposed to experiment. Fortunately a reaction among our younger writers has lessened this danger. An Irish-American, Mary Lavin, argued the point in a story in her book *A Single Lady* (1951). 'Life itself has very little plot,' she said; 'Life itself has a habit of breaking off in the middle.' This is true, as far as it goes. Readers of the short story do not look for any elaborate formal mechanism of composition in an art which is essentially fluid and elastic. But life is not the whole of fiction; a prime requirement of the short story is that it should sustain the illusion of suspense. The most beautifully written presentation of a state of mind will not do this unless the author can seize the reader's attention from the start and hold it as the story develops. Miss Elizabeth Bowen, in a foreword to Mr. Nigel Kneale's *Tomato Cain* (1949), recognized that the short story could all too easily have fallen under a blight 'and become an example of too much prose draped around an insufficiently vital feeling or a trumped-up, insufficiently strong idea . . . A story must be a story.'

The present volume does not ignore experiment; in some cases the quality of the writing and a consummate skill in evoking mood and atmosphere have triumphed over a certain lack of form. And the collection demonstrates on page after page the new awareness of the lights and shadows within the human mind which has been generated by modern psychology and by the nervous intensity of contemporary life. In his compelling story 'The Kite' Somerset Maugham shows that he had moved in step with the times. But the selection has not been made to display any particular point of view; it would have been incomplete without examples of C. S. Forester's and

Graham Greene's narrative power, without Eric Linklater's and Evelyn Waugh's contrasting fantasies, without William Plomer's or John Moore's shrewd appreciations of native character, or Clemence Dane's classic account of a village tragedy that would have moved Thomas Hardy.

The war of 1939-45 has left its mark on many of these tales. We hear of 'Munich' and the Eighth Army, of bomb damage, of an English soldier who did not return, and of a German general who fought to keep his honour. The past quarter of a century has been sombre enough; inevitably these pages reflect its tension. Yet the dominating impression in these English stories is of humour—not necessarily in the comic sense (though some of the stories are extremely funny)—but in the sense in which Bret Harte used it of his own country's stories, the sense of a humorous perspective of life. They are English, again, in their strong vein of poetry and in the undiminished respect that their authors have shown, throughout a period of change, for the saving graces of personality. Some loving passages of landscape insist, too, that we are still a nation of water-colourists.

A selection remains a personal thing. This selection aims only at presenting some of the best modern stories that have been written in their various kinds. Other readers will have different preferences. This much is certain—that these stories do not derive from a dying art. Among them perhaps one or two will live to speak, fifty years hence, for English literature.

D. H.

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W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

The Kite

I KNOW this is an odd story. I don't understand it myself and if I set it down in black and white it is only with a faint hope that when I have written it I may get a clearer view of it, or rather with the hope that some reader, better acquainted with the complications of human nature than I am, may offer me an explanation that will make it comprehensible to me. Of course the first thing that occurs to me is that there is something Freudian about it. Now, I have read a good deal of Freud, and some books by his followers, and intending to write this story I have recently flipped through again the volume published by the Modern Library which contains his basic writings. It was something of a task, for he is a dull and verbose writer, and the acrimony with which he claims to have originated such and such a theory shows a vanity and a jealousy of others working in the same field which somewhat ill become the man of science. I believe, however, that he was a kindly and benign old party. As we know, there is often a great difference between the man and the writer. The writer may be bitter, harsh and brutal, while the man may be so meek and mild that he wouldn't say boo to a goose. But that is neither here nor there. I found nothing in my re-reading of Freud's works that cast any light on the subject I had in mind. I can only relate the facts and leave it at that.

First of all I must make it plain that it is not my

story and that I knew none of the persons with whom it is concerned. It was told me one evening by my friend Ned Preston, and he told it me because he didn't know how to deal with the circumstances and he thought, quite wrongly as it happened, that I might be able to give him some advice that would help him. In a previous story I have related what I thought the reader should know about Ned Preston, and so now I need only remind him that my friend was a prison visitor at Wormwood Scrubs. He took his duties very seriously and made the prisoners' troubles his own. We had been dining together at the Café Royal in that long, low room with its absurd and charming decoration which is all that remains of the old Café Royal that painters have loved to paint; and we were sitting over our coffee and liqueurs and, so far as Ned was concerned against his doctor's orders, smoking very long and very good Havanas.

'I've got a funny chap to deal with at the Scrubs just now,' he said, after a pause, 'and I'm blowed if I know how to deal with him.'

'What's he in for?' I asked.

'He left his wife and the court ordered him to pay so much a week in alimony and he's absolutely refused to pay it. I've argued with him till I was blue in the face. I've told him he's only cutting off his nose to spite his face. He says he'll stay in jail all his life rather than pay her a penny. I tell him he can't let her starve, and all he says is: "Why not?" He's perfectly well behaved, he's no trouble, he works well, he seems quite happy, he's just getting a lot of fun out of thinking what a devil of a time his wife is having.'

'What's he got against her?'

'She smashed his kite.'

'She did what?' I cried.

'Exactly that. She smashed his kite. He says he'll never forgive her for that till his dying day.'

'He must be crazy.'

'No, he isn't, he's a perfectly reasonable, quite intelligent, decent fellow.'

Herbert Sunbury was his name, and his mother, who was very refined, never allowed him to be called Herb or Bertie, but always Herbert, just as she never called her husband Sam but only Samuel. Mrs. Sunbury's first name was Beatrice, and when she got engaged to Mr. Sunbury and he ventured to call her Bea she put her foot down firmly.

'Beatrice I was christened,' she cried, 'and Beatrice I always have been and always shall be, to you and to my nearest and dearest.'

She was a little woman, but strong, active and wiry, with a sallow skin, sharp, regular features and small, beady eyes. Her hair, suspiciously black for her age, was always very neat, and she wore it in the style of Queen Victoria's daughters, which she had adopted as soon as she was old enough to put it up and had never thought fit to change. The possibility that she did something to keep her hair its original colour was, if such was the case, her only concession to frivolity, for, far from using rouge or lipstick, she had never in her life so much as passed a powder-puff over her nose. She never wore anything but black dresses of good material, but made (by a little woman round the corner) regardless of fashion after a pattern that was both serviceable and decorous. Her only ornament was a thin gold chain from which hung a small gold cross.

Samuel Sunbury was a little man too. He was as

thin and spare as his wife, but he had sandy hair, gone very thin now so that he had to wear it very long on one side and brush it carefully over the large bald patch. He had pale blue eyes and his complexion was pasty. He was a clerk in a lawyer's office and had worked his way up from office boy to a respectable position. His employer called him Mr. Sunbury and sometimes asked him to see an unimportant client. Every morning for twenty-four years Samuel Sunbury had taken the same train to the City, except of course on Sundays and during his fortnight's holiday at the seaside, and every evening he had taken the same train back to the suburb in which he lived. He was neat in his dress; he went to work in quiet grey trousers, a black coat and a bowler hat, and when he came home he put on his slippers and a black coat which was too old and shiny to wear at the office; but on Sundays when he went to the chapel he and Mrs. Sunbury attended he wore a morning coat with his bowler. Thus he showed his respect for the day of rest and at the same time registered a protest against the ungodly who went bicycling or lounged about the streets until the pubs opened. On principle the Sunburys were total abstainers, but on Sundays, when to make up for the frugal lunch, consisting of a scone and butter with a glass of milk, which Samuel had during the week, Beatrice gave him a good dinner of roast beef and Yorkshire pudding, for his health's sake she liked him to have a glass of beer. Since she wouldn't for the world have kept liquor in the house, he sneaked out with a jug after morning service and got a quart from the pub round the corner; but nothing would induce him to drink alone, so, just to be sociable like, she had a glass too.

Herbert was the only child the Lord had vouchsafed to them, and this certainly through no precaution on their part. It just happened that way. They doted on him. He was a pretty baby and then a good-looking child. Mrs. Sunbury brought him up carefully. She taught him to sit up at table and not put his elbows on it, and she taught him how to use his knife and fork like a little gentleman. She taught him to stretch out his little finger when he took his tea-cup to drink out of it and when he asked why, she said:

‘Never you mind. That’s how it’s done. It shows you know what’s what.’

In due course Herbert grew old enough to go to school. Mrs. Sunbury was anxious because she had never let him play with the children in the street.

‘Evil communications corrupt good manners,’ she said. ‘I always have kept myself to myself and I always shall keep myself to myself.’

Although they had lived in the same house ever since they were married she had taken care to keep her neighbours at a distance.

‘You never know who people are in London,’ she said. ‘One thing leads to another, and before you know where you are you’re mixed up with a lot of riff-raff and you can’t get rid of them.’

She didn’t like the idea of Herbert being thrown into contact with a lot of rough boys at the County Council school and she said to him:

‘Now, Herbert, do what I do; keep yourself to yourself and don’t have anything more to do with them than you can help.’

But Herbert got on very well at school. He was a good worker and far from stupid. His reports were

excellent. It turned out that he had a good head for figures.

'If that's a fact,' said Samuel Sunbury, 'he'd better be an accountant. There's always a good job waiting for a good accountant.'

So it was settled there and then that this was what Herbert was to be. He grew tall.

'Why, Herbert,' said his mother, 'soon you'll be as tall as your dad.'

By the time he left school he was two inches taller, and by the time he stopped growing he was five feet ten.

'Just the right height,' said his mother. 'Not too tall and not too short.'

He was a nice-looking boy, with his mother's regular features and dark hair, but he had inherited his father's blue eyes, and though he was rather pale his skin was smooth and clear. Samuel Sunbury had got him into the office of the accountants who came twice a year to do the accounts of his own firm and by the time he was twenty-one he was able to bring back to his mother every week quite a nice little sum. She gave him back three half-crowns for his lunches and ten shillings for pocket money, and the rest she put in the Savings Bank for him against a rainy day.

When Mr. and Mrs. Sunbury went to bed on the night of Herbert's twenty-first birthday, and in passing I may say that Mrs. Sunbury never went to bed, she retired, but Mr. Sunbury who was not quite so refined as his wife always said: 'Me for Bedford,'—when then Mr. and Mrs. Sunbury went to bed, Mrs. Sunbury said:

'Some people don't know how lucky they are; thank the Lord, I do. No one's ever had a better son than our Herbert. Hardly a day's illness in his

life and he's never given me a moment's worry. It just shows if you bring up somebody right they'll be a credit to you. Fancy him being twenty-one, I can hardly believe it.'

'Yes, I suppose before we know where we are he'll be marrying and leaving us.'

'What should he want to do that for?' asked Mrs. Sunbury with asperity. 'He's got a good home here, hasn't he? Don't you go putting silly ideas into his head, Samuel, or you and me'll have words and you know that's the last thing I want. Marry indeed! He's got more sense than that. He knows when he's well off. He's got sense, Herbert has.'

Mr. Sunbury was silent. He had long ago learnt that it didn't get him anywhere with Beatrice to answer back.

'I don't hold with a man marrying till he knows his own mind,' she went on. 'And a man doesn't know his own mind till he's thirty or thirty-five.'

'He was pleased with his presents,' said Mr. Sunbury to change the conversation.

'And so he ought to be,' said Mrs. Sunbury, still upset.

They had in fact been handsome. Mr. Sunbury had given him a silver wrist-watch, with hands that you could see in the dark, and Mrs. Sunbury had given him a kite. It wasn't by any means the first one she had given him. That was when he was seven years old, and it happened this way. There was a large common near where they lived and on Saturday afternoons when it was fine Mrs. Sunbury took her husband and son for a walk there. She said it was good for Samuel to get a breath of fresh air after being cooped up in a stuffy office all the week. There were always a lot of people on the common,