

Great English Short Stories

EDITED BY
LEWIS MELVILLE
AND
REGINALD HARGREAVES



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INTRODUCTION

"TELL us a story!" has been the cry on the lips of Humanity since first it emerged from the dark stage of purely animal existence and entered into the possession of conscious thought. For with the boon of thought—which means imagination, no less—man developed the most universal of all interests—the interest in the doings and mental processes of his fellows.

And from the retailing of what actually *had* happened the step to the telling of what *might* have happened was a short and easy one. Thus fiction was born to a world ever eager to escape from its own mundane realities into the realm of the romantic and the heroic.

The beginning of story-telling—who shall attempt with any accuracy to place or date it?

If the *Book of Genesis* be admitted as a collection, and a very exquisite collection, of folk-lore, then we still remain in dubiety as to the date of its inception in relation to the origins which subsequently found coherent expression in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, or the tangle of hearsay and legend which became crystallised in the form of the Scandinavian *Edda*, or the migratory Teuton's *Beowulf*.

The Saga, in one form or another, has been man's immemorial expression of the tale-weaving instinct, for with this instinct is combined man's perennial urge toward the chronicle embodying those heroic qualities which we all instinctively admire. But the Saga has invariably been expressed in verse, often crude if vigorous, though sometimes imbued with real melody and dignity. Fiction was to cling to this mode of expression for many a decade before it achieved the simple directness of prose.

The bard, the ballad-monger, the strolling *jongleur*, those perambulating custodians of a nation's store of folk-lore and romance, used the rhymed form almost universally. Before the era of the printed page the great traditional stories were handed on from mouth to mouth, from one generation to another. The rhyme-form was chosen very largely as an aid to memorisation, since the mind retained a story in that form with greater ease than the same tale expressed in more mundane prose.

Chaucer, the father of the written tale, used verse, only departing

from it occasionally, as in the interpolated *Tale of Melibeus* and *The Parson's Tale*, which, however, were not pieces of original work but adaptations. Likewise the author of *The Friars of Berwick* wrote exclusively in verse. As with the English writers, so those of the Continent expressed their ideas almost exclusively in rhyme.

Malory, the first name of any real significance in the history of English prose, gave us, in the *Morte d'Arthur*, what was, in the main, no more than a brilliant adaptation from a French original, in which language the short story was already deeply rooted. And since adaptations have no place in a volume of this description, Malory, perforce, must go unrepresented.

Barnabe Riche, although a prolific and self-confessed adapter, can claim for at least a certain proportion of his work the additional merit of personal invention. He was, it is to be noted, also one of the first writers to introduce the "human" note into the story. With him is first clearly made manifest the intrusion of purely *lay* interests.

Stories for long ages had been nothing more nor less than thinly disguised "moralities"—as were the early Chester "Miracle" Plays—sermons in the guise of fiction. Their purpose to maintain the tenets of religious belief, communal equity, and domestic probity were as unmistakable as they were sometimes clumsy.

But mankind cannot live by sermonising alone.

Sex is the basis of the continuation of life, and so, in time, recognition of this fact found itself reflected in the story-telling of the nations. "Sex" crept into the "moralities" that the church struggled so sedulously to keep aloof, austere, and remote. That was the beginning of "romance," and once you give its head to "romance," then "morality," in the academic sense, goes by the board!

Thus, by a very simple process of evolution, we came by the "human" story, the "domestic" story, the story based upon the clash and interplay of human passion, still illumined by that "something more" to which it is in all human nature to aspire; that "something more" that lifts the dull, pain-racked world into the realms of colour and of splendour, where the glowing tapestry of idealisation pales the warp and woof of the world of work-a-day to a thing of drab and dreary fustian; a world of the transcendental which, could we but live up to it, would make of life a pageant rather than a penalty.

It is its power to render possible the escape from the disappointments of actuality into the higher realms of aspiration and beatification that has rendered so much of the printed page the thing of priceless worth we gratefully acknowledge it to be. For it is only the prig or the pedant who would deny a healthy predilection for "a happy ending"!

II

A tale which holdeth children from play
And old men from the chimney corner.

—SIR PHILIP SIDNEY.

A story, to be worthy of serious attention, must possess first, *substance*, and then, *form*.

Given these two essential qualities, and manner, length, and all the rest of it, are matters of comparatively minor importance. And although it is just possible to interest with substance almost negligibly accoutred in the matter of form—although no substance is of value unless it beats with the pulse of life—to attempt to hold the attention with form entirely devoid of substance is foredoomed to certain failure. You may be as “style”-ish as you please; but unless you have something to say, something really of interest to put on record—then the fluid had best stay undisturbed in your ink-well, and the fair sheet on your desk remain unspoiled. For no matter how magnificently it is done, to carve an orange pip is, in itself, not enough.

In the clearest realisation of these obligations, the English (and let it be said, in anticipation of the usual frenzied protest, that by the use of this term it is intended to cover any writer in the common tongue) have proved themselves second to none in their power of apprehension.

As a race it has always been the habit of the English to abnegate their most sterling qualities, and emphasise with almost poignant relish their alleged deficiencies. They grumble, they pay, they “muddle through,” always to an accompaniment of a dirge-like reiteration of their own manifold sins of omission and commission. This, accompanied by an almost pathetic eagerness to laud the virtues of “the other fellow.” More, they become almost painfully self-conscious at the suggestion that of certain rather fine attributes they themselves are not totally devoid.

The cry, taken up by the jealous “stranger without the gates,” and repeated with parrot monotony and shrillness by the self-constituted elect (for whom there can exist no virtue in anything unless it be of foreign extraction!) thus passes into the simulacrum of a belief. And for so long have we laboured in this atmosphere of intellectual snobbery and misrepresentation that to regard this “belief” with a sense of proportion and without prejudiced judgment calls for a real effort of detachment.

So it is that, when Short Stories are in question, one has been trained automatically to mouth first the names of the great Continentals, de

Maupassant, Chekhov, Turgeniev, Heyse, and Hauff. But it is no derogation of the power and quality of these admitted giants of their art to assert that qualities as great exist no less amongst the writers of this land. It is all very fair and right to be loyal to, and open-minded about, the literary genius of the foreign writer, but the sad thing about too strenuous a loyalty is the disloyalty in which it involves us for other people, and an open mind is very often a singularly empty one!

Stories may roughly be divided into two categories. Of these the first embraces all that we mean by the "home" story, a story dealing with our own land in one of its many facets, and with a certain standardised atmosphere. It may be a quiet tale of little suburban happenings, almost trivial in essence—although of vital significance to the protagonists; it may reflect some aspect of our daily national life with which the majority are unacquainted except by hearsay, but of which the writer, through the exigencies of his special circumstances, is enabled to write with particular authority; it may be a tale of London's mean streets, or of the swarming life of the grim Five Towns or the Black Country of further North; of Dartmoor's thymy spaces, or of the formalised artificiality of Park Lane and Mayfair. Of these we may claim for them that they are indigenous, peculiar to the race.

The other category takes the reader further afield: to the hot skies and spicy odours of the East; Hong-Kong, Shanghai, the dust and aridity of the Sudan, the wind-swept spaces of Canada, the *bund* of some furtive Indian seaport, the malodorous havens of the Levant. Or, nearer home, though hardly less remote, to the brooding coast of North Africa, the grim chaplet which encircles that ever-threatening, illimitable desert; to languid Spain, lazing under the Rock's swart frown; to some half-forgotten corner of ramshackle Portugal, or, nearer still, set in the broad, smiling land of France.

It is in regard to this last-named category that, for variety of subject, for an almost kaleidoscopic range, for colour, vision, all the facilities that come only as the fruit of first-hand knowledge, as a citizen of the most far-flung Empire in the world, the English writer stands alone in his position of supreme advantage.

Behind our scattered armies, in the wake of those ships that make acquaintance with every ripple of the Seven Seas, in the track of the pioneer and the explorer, has followed the man with the pen, observing, registering, and retailing a host of scenes and impressions of which the more indigenous Continental can never hope to glean the actual personal impression essential to their translation into words upon the printed page.

If there exists a defect in the mass of work from Continental pens it is that, inevitably, a vast proportion of it is parochial. But with so

many Parish Pumps from which to make selection the English writer is spared the first and most fruitful equation of monotony.

It has been somewhat querulously urged by some critics that the English short story often suffers from too provoking a brevity. But this contention is surely fallacious. You cannot measure the artistic qualities of a work of the imagination with a yard-stick. A Vermeer or a Meissonier has demonstrated that on something less than twenty inches by eighteen a greater impression of life and verisimilitude could be conveyed than a lesser man could transplant to an acre of paint-covered canvas.

It is the same with the writer, for if brevity be the soul of wit, no less does style very largely consist of the art of leaving out. A verity can be prismatic irrespective of its size, and the length of a story is just exactly the length of its own integral interest. If you have anything to say, *really* to say, then length automatically adjusts itself. Short as it may be it will not prove too short: long as it may be it will not prove too long—as George Bernard Shaw has demonstrated beyond question in the even more difficult medium of the theatre. If you have nothing to say—then an exclamation mark is far too long!

Of humour—that kindlier brother of satire—the English have long proved themselves to be masters. Less acid and cynical than in the case of some of the Continental craftsmen—since a robust, tolerant good-humour has always been a characteristic of the race—for all that English humour does not lack an occasional exemplar of the more mordant, reflective style of comic writing. And if irony be in question, the name of William Makepeace Thackeray alone stands as a guarantee of full measure, pressed down and running over.

The variety and richness of type of a maritime as well as a commercial, industrial, and agricultural race has provided, and will continue to provide, the English humorous writer with an inexhaustible gallery from which to pick and choose; and while the Cockney remains with us there exists an especial field that no other country can hope to parallel, a field of a rich and fruity savour, a kindly and wholesome philosophy, as unique as it is native to the soil.

III

For the rest, the endeavour of the Editors of this volume has been twofold. In the first place, it has been their desire to provide interesting reading; in the second, to demonstrate to some extent the development of the short story, and to show it as it was during the various periods of that development.

Included in this book will be found, therefore, several short stories

that can substantiate no claim to the description "great," but to which a place has been yielded rather on the score of their historical reflection. This aspect of them is their sole excuse for their intrusion.

In conclusion, the Editors feel it only right to state that they have been faced with an implacable determination on the part of a few authors to deny the inclusion of specimens of their work in any collection of representative stories, however brave the company by which they might find themselves surrounded. This sustained reluctance it has been found quite impossible to dissolve, neither pelf nor pleading being of the very least avail. So while no one can regret more forcibly than those responsible for this book the omission of one or two "great names"—their identity will occur at once to the most casual reader—the onus for their non-inclusion rests, not with the Editors, who have strained every endeavour to secure their incorporation, but with the reluctant authors themselves.

To the more amenable—an enheartening majority—our thanks are, therefore, doubly due.

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GREAT ENGLISH SHORT STORIES

BARNABE RICHE

(c.1540-c.1620)

BARNABE RICHE was of gentle birth, and distantly connected with the family of Lord Chancellor Rich (1496?-1567). He became a soldier, and saw active service in Queen Mary's war with France in 1557-8; in the Low Countries in the early years of Elizabeth's reign; and, later, in Ireland. He rose to the rank of captain. From 1574 to the end of his life he wrote assiduously, and produced numerous romances in the style of *Euphues* of John Lyly (1554?-1606) and pamphlets attacking the vices of the day.

"Of Apolonius and Silla" is taken from *Riche his Farewell to the Military Profession*, which was published in 1581. The spelling has here been modernised. From this story Shakespeare drew the plot of *Twelfth Night*.

OF APOLONIUS AND SILLA

THERE is no child that is born into this wretched world, but before it doth suck the mother's milk, it taketh first a sup of the cup of error, which maketh us, when we come to riper years, not only to enter into actions of injury, but many times to stray from that is right and reason; but in all other things, wherein we show ourselves to be most drunken with this poisoned cup, it is in our actions of love; for the lover is so estranged from that is right, and wandereth so wide from the bounds of reason, that he is not able to deem white from black, good from bad, virtue from vice; but only led by the appetite of his own affections, and grounding them on the foolishness of his own fancies, will so settle his liking on such a one, as either by desert or unworthiness will merit rather to be loathed than loved.

If a question might be asked, what is the ground in deed of reasonable love, whereby the knot is knit of true and perfect friendship, I think those that be wise would answer—desert: that is, where the party beloved doth requite us with the like; for otherwise, if the bare show of beauty, or the comeliness of personage might be sufficient to confirm us in our love, those that be accustomed to go to fairs and markets might sometimes fall in love with twenty in a day; desert must then be (of force) the ground of reasonable love; for to love them that hate us, to follow them that fly from us, to fawn on them

that frown on us, to curry favour with them that disdain us, to be glad to please them that care not how they offend us, who will not confess this to be an erroneous love, neither grounded upon wit nor reason? Wherefore, right courteous gentlewomen, if it please you with patience to peruse this history following, you shall see Dame Error so play her part with a leash of lovers, a male and two females, as shall work a wonder to your wise judgment, in noting the effect of their amorous devices, and conclusions of their actions: the first neglecting the love of a noble dame, young, beautiful, and fair, who only for his goodwill played the part of a servingman, contended to abide any manner of pain only to behold him: he again setting his love of a dame, that despising him (being a noble Duke) gave herself to a servingman (as she had thought); but it otherwise fell out, as the substance of this tale shall better describe. And because I have been something tedious in my first discourse, offending your patient ears with the hearing of a circumstance overlong, from henceforth, that which I mind to write shall be done with such celerity, as the matter that I pretend to pen may in any wise permit me, and thus followeth the history.

During the time that the famous city of Constantinople remained in the hands of Christians, amongst many other noble men that kept their abiding in that flourishing city, there was one whose name was Apolonius, a worthy Duke, who being but a very young man, and even then new come to his possessions, which were very great, levied a mighty band of men at his own proper charges, with whom he served against the Turk during the space of one whole year: in which time, although it were very short, this young Duke so behaved himself, as well by prowess and valiance showed with his own hands, as otherwise by his wisdom and liberality used towards his soldiers, that all his world was filled with the fame of this noble Duke. When he had thus spent one year's service, he caused his trumpet to sound a retreat, and gathering his company together, and embarking themselves, he set sail, holding his course towards Constantinople: but, being upon the sea, by the extremity of a tempest which suddenly fell, his fleet was dissevered, some one way, and some another; but he himself recovered the Isle of Cyprus, where he was worthily received by Pontus, Duke and governor of the same isle, with whom he lodged while his ships were new repairing.

This Pontus, that was lord and governor of this famous isle, was an ancient Duke, and had two children, a son and a daughter: his son was named Silvio, of whom hereafter we shall have further occasion to speak; but at this instant he was in the parts of Africa, serving in the wars.

The daughter's name was Silla, whose beauty was so peerless, that she had the sovereignty amongst all other dames, as well for her beauty

as for the nobleness of her birth. This Silla, having heard of the worthiness of Apolonius, this young Duke, who besides his beauty and good graces had a certain natural allurements, that being now in his company in her father's court, she was so strangely attached with the love of Apolonius, that there was nothing might content her but his presence and sweet sight; and although she saw no manner of hope to attain to that she most desired, knowing Apolonius to be but a guest, and ready to take the benefit of the next wind, and to depart into a strange country, whereby she was bereaved of all possibility ever to see him again, and therefore strove with herself to leave her fondness, but all in vain; it would not be, but, like the fowl which is once limed, the more she striveth, the faster she tieth herself. So Silla was now constrained, perforce her will, to yield to love, wherefore, from time to time, she used so great familiarity with him as her honour might well permit, and fed him with such amorous baits as the modesty of a maid could reasonably afford; which when she perceived did take but small effect, feeling herself so much outraged with the extremity of her passion, by the only countenance that she bestowed upon Apolonius, it might have been well perceived that the very eyes pleaded unto him for pity and remorse. But Apolonius, coming but lately from out the field from the chasing of his enemies, and his fury not yet thoroughly dissolved, nor purged from his stomach, gave no regard to those amorous enticements, which by reason of his youth, he had not been acquainted withal. But his mind ran more to hear his pilots bring news of a merry wind to serve his turn to Constantinople, which in the end came very prosperously; and giving Duke Pontus hearty thanks for his great entertainment, taking his leave of himself and the Lady Silla, his daughter, departed with his company, and with a happy gale arrived at his desired port. Gentlewomen, according to my promise, I will here, for brevity's sake, omit to make repetition of the long and dolorous discourse recorded by Silla for this sudden departure of her Apolonius, knowing you to be as tenderly hearted as Silla herself, whereby you may the better conjecture the fury of her fever. But Silla, the further that she saw herself bereaved of all hope ever any more to see her beloved Apolonius, so much the more contagious were her passions, and made the greater speed to execute that she had premeditated in her mind, which was this. Amongst many servants that did attend upon her, there was one whose name was Pedro, who had a long time waited upon her in her chamber, whereby she was well assured of his fidelity and trust: to that Pedro therefore she betrayed first the fervency of her love borne to Apolonius, conjuring him in the name of the goddess of love herself, and binding him by the duty that a servant ought to have, that tendereth his mistress safety and good liking, and desiring him, with tears trickling down her cheeks, that he

would give his consent to aid and assist her in that she had determined, which was for that she was fully resolved to go to Constantinople, where she might again take the view of her beloved Apolonius, that he, according to the trust she had reposed in him, would not refuse to give his consent, secretly to convey her from out her father's court, according as she should give him direction, and also to make himself partaker of her journey, and to wait upon her till she had seen the end of her determination.

Pedro, perceiving with what vehemence his lady and mistress had made request unto him, albeit he saw many perils and doubts depending in her pretence, notwithstanding, gave his consent to be at her disposition, promising her to further her with his best advice, and to be ready to obey whatsoever she would please to command him. The match being thus agreed upon, and all things prepared in a readiness for their departure, it happened there was a galley of Constantinople ready to depart, which Pedro understanding, came to the captain, desiring him to have passage for himself and for a poor maid that was his sister, which were bound to Constantinople upon certain urgent affairs: to which request the captain granted, willing him to prepare aboard with all speed, because the wind served him presently to depart.

Pedro now coming to his mistress, and telling her how he had handled the matter with the captain, she liking very well of the device, disguising herself into very simple attire, stole away from out her father's court, and came with Pedro, whom now she calleth brother, aboard the galley, where all things being in readiness, and the wind serving very well, they launched forth with their oars, and set sail. When they were at the sea, the captain of the galley, taking the view of Silla, perceiving her singular beauty, he was better pleased in beholding of her face than in taking the height either of the sun or star, and thinking her, by the homeliness of her apparel, to be but some simple maiden, calling her into his cabin, he began to break with her, after the sea fashion, desiring her to use his own cabin for her better ease, and during the time that she remained at the sea, she should not want a bed; and then, whispering softly in her ear, he said, that, for want of a bedfellow, he himself would supply that room. Silla, not being acquainted with any such talk, blushed for shame, but made him no answer at all. My captain, feeling such a bickering within himself, the like whereof he had never endured upon the sea, was like to be taken prisoner aboard his own ship, and forced to yield himself a captive without any cannon shot; wherefore, to salve all sores, and thinking it the readiest way to speed, he began to break with Silla in the way of marriage, telling her how happy a voyage she had made, to fall into the liking of such a one as himself was, who was able to keep and maintain her like a gentlewoman, and for her sake would likewise