

PENGUIN MODERN CLASSICS



E.M. Forster
Collected Short Stories

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COLLECTED SHORT STORIES

Edward Morgan Forster was born in London in 1879, attended Tonbridge School as a day boy, and went on to King's College, Cambridge, in 1897. With King's he had a lifelong connection and was elected to an Honorary Fellowship in 1946. He declared that his life as a whole had not been dramatic, and he was unfailingly modest about his achievements. Interviewed by the B.B.C. on his eightieth birthday, he said: 'I have not written as much as I'd like to . . . I write for two reasons; partly to make money and partly to win the respect of people whom I respect . . . I had better add that I am quite sure I am not a great novelist.' Eminent critics and the general public have judged otherwise; in Penguins alone *A Passage to India* has sold well over a million copies.

Books by E. M. Forster published in Penguins include his six novels, two volumes of short stories, two collections of essays, and *Aspects of the Novel*. He also wrote two biographies, two books about Alexandria (where he worked for the Red Cross in the First World War), *The Hill of Devi* (based on two long visits to India), and, with Eric Crozier, the libretto for Britten's opera *Billy Budd*. He died in June 1970.

E. M. FORSTER

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SHORT STORIES

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INTRODUCTION

THESE fantasies were written at various dates previous to the first world war, and represent all that I have accomplished in a particular line. Much has happened since : transport has been disorganized, frontiers rectified on the map and in the spirit, there has been a second world war, there are preparations for a third, and Fantasy to-day tends to retreat or to dig herself in or to become apocalyptic out of deference to the atom-bomb. She can be caught in the open here by those who care to catch her. She flits over the scenes of Italian and English holidays, or wings her way with even less justification towards the countries of the future. She or he. For Fantasy, though often female, sometimes resembles a man, and even functions for Hermes who used to do the smaller behests of the gods – messenger, machine-breaker, and conductor of souls to a not-too-terrible hereafter.

The opening item, *The Story of a Panic*, is the first story I ever wrote and the attendant circumstances remain with me vividly. After I came down from Cambridge – the Cambridge to which I have just returned – I travelled abroad for a year, and I think it was in the May of 1902 that I took a walk near Ravello. I sat down in a valley, a few miles above the town, and suddenly the first chapter of the story rushed into my mind as if it had waited for me there. I received it as an entity and wrote it out as soon as I returned to the hotel. But it seemed unfinished and a few days later I added some more until it was three times as long; as now printed. Of these two processes, the first – that of sitting down on the theme as if it were an anthill – has been rare. I did it again next year in Greece, where the whole of *The Road from Colonus* hung ready for me in a hollow tree not far from Olympia. And I did it, or rather tried it on, a third time, in Cornwall, at the Gurnard's Head. Here, just in the same way, a story met me, and, since the *Panic* and *Colonus* had both been published and admired, I embraced it as a masterpiece. It was about a man who was saved from drowning by some fishermen, and knew not how to reward them. What is your life worth? £5? £5,000? He ended by giving nothing, he lived among them, hated

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and despised. As the theme swarmed over me, I put my hand into my purse, drew out a golden sovereign – they existed then – and inserted it into a collecting-box of the Royal Lifeboat Institution which had been erected upon the Gurnard's Head for such situations as this. I could well afford it. I was bound to make the money over and again. Calm sea, flat submerged rock whereon my hero was to cling and stagger, village whence his rescuers should sally – I carried off the lot, and only had to improvise his wife, a very understanding woman. The Rock was the title of this ill-fated effort. It was a complete flop. Not an editor would look at it. My inspiration had been genuine but worthless, like so much inspiration, and I have never sat down on a theme since.

One of my novels, *The Longest Journey*, does indeed depend from an encounter with the genius loci, but indirectly, complicatedly, not here to be considered. Directly, the genius loci has only inspired me thrice, and on the third occasion it deprived me of a sovereign. As a rule, I am set going by my own arguments or memories, or by the motion of my pen, and the various methods do not necessarily produce a discordant result. If the reader will compare the first chapter of *The Story of a Panic*, caught straight off the spot it describes, with the two subsequent chapters, in which I set myself to wonder what would happen afterwards, I do not think he will notice that a fresh hemisphere has swung into action. All a writer's faculties, including the valuable faculty of faking, do conspire together thus for the creative act, and often do contrive an even surface, one putting in a word here, another there.

The other stories call for little comment from their author. *The Machine Stops* is a reaction to one of the earlier heavens of H. G. Wells. *The Eternal Moment*, though almost an honest-to-God yarn, is a meditation on Cortina d'Ampezzo. As for *The Point of It*, it was ill-liked when it came out by my Bloomsbury friends. 'What is the point of it?' they queried thinly, nor did I know how to reply.

Original publication was in two volumes. The first was named after *The Celestial Omnibus*, and was dedicated 'To the Memory of the Independent Review'. This was a monthly, controlled by an editorial board of friends who had encouraged me to start writing; another friend, Roger Fry, designed the book-cover and end-paper. The second volume came out many years later. It was called *The*

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Eternal Moment, and I dedicated it 'To T. E. in the absence of anything else'. T. E. was Lawrence of Arabia.

Now that the stories are gathered together into a single cover, and are sailing farther into a world they never foresaw, should they be dedicated anew? Perhaps, and perhaps to a god. Hermes Psychopompus suggests himself, who came to my mind at the beginning of this introduction. He can anyhow stand in the prow and watch the disintegrating sea.

E. M. FORSTER

Cambridge, 1947

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THE STORY OF A PANIC

EUSTACE's career – if career it can be called – certainly dates from that afternoon in the chestnut woods above Ravello. I confess at once that I am a plain, simple man, with no pretensions to literary style. Still, I do flatter myself that I can tell a story without exaggerating, and I have therefore decided to give an unbiased account of the extraordinary events of eight years ago.

Ravello is a delightful place with a delightful little hotel in which we met some charming people. There were the two Miss Robinsons, who had been there for six weeks with Eustace, their nephew, then a boy of about fourteen. Mr Sandbach had also been there some time. He had held a curacy in the north of England, which he had been compelled to resign on account of ill-health, and while he was recruiting at Ravello he had taken in hand Eustace's education – which was then sadly deficient – and was endeavouring to fit him for one of our great public schools. Then there was Mr Leyland, a would-be artist, and, finally, there was the nice landlady, Signora Scafetti, and the nice English-speaking waiter, Emmanuele – though at the time of which I am speaking Emmanuele was away, visiting a sick father.

To this little circle, I, my wife, and my two daughters made, I venture to think, a not unwelcome addition. But though I liked most of the company well enough, there were two of them to whom I did not take at all. They were the artist, Leyland, and the Miss Robinsons' nephew, Eustace.

Leyland was simply conceited and odious, and, as those qualities will be amply illustrated in my narrative, I need not enlarge upon them here. But Eustace was something besides: he was indescribably repellent.

I am fond of boys as a rule, and was quite disposed to be friendly. I and my daughters offered to take him out – ‘No, walking was such a fag.’ Then I asked him to come and bathe – ‘No, he could not swim.’

‘Every English boy should be able to swim,’ I said, ‘I will teach you myself.’

‘There, Eustace dear,’ said Miss Robinson; ‘here is a chance for you.’

But he said he was afraid of the water! – a boy afraid! – and of course I said no more.

I would not have minded so much if he had been a really studious boy, but he neither played hard nor worked hard. His favourite occupations were lounging on the terrace in an easy chair and loafing along the high road, with his feet shuffling up the dust and his shoulders stooping forward. Naturally enough, his features were pale, his chest contracted, and his muscles undeveloped. His aunts thought him delicate; what he really needed was discipline.

That memorable day we all arranged to go for a picnic up in the chestnut woods – all, that is, except Janet, who stopped behind to finish her water-colour of the Cathedral – not a very successful attempt, I am afraid.

I wander off into these irrelevant details because in my mind I cannot separate them from an account of the day; and it is the same with the conversation during the picnic: all is imprinted on my brain together. After a couple of hours’ ascent, we left the donkeys that had carried the Miss Robinsons and my wife, and all proceeded on foot to the head of the valley – Vallone Fontana Caroso is its proper name, I find.

I have visited a good deal of fine scenery before and since, but have found little that has pleased me more. The valley ended in a vast hollow, shaped like a cup, into which radiated ravines from the precipitous hills around. Both the valley and the ravines and the ribs of hill that divided the ravines were covered with leafy chestnut, so that the general appearance

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was that of a many-fingered green hand, palm upwards, which was clutching convulsively to keep us in its grasp. Far down the valley we could see Ravello and the sea, but that was the only sign of another world.

'Oh, what a perfectly lovely place,' said my daughter Rose. 'What a picture it would make!'

'Yes,' said Mr Sandbach. 'Many a famous European gallery would be proud to have a landscape as beautiful as this upon its walls.'

'On the contrary,' said Leyland, 'it would make a very poor picture. Indeed, it is not paintable at all.'

'And why is that?' said Rose, with far more deference than he deserved.

'Look, in the first place,' he replied, 'how intolerably straight against the sky is the line of the hill. It would need breaking up and diversifying. And where we are standing the whole thing is out of perspective. Besides, all the colouring is monotonous and crude.'

'I do not know anything about pictures,' I put in, 'and I do not pretend to know: but I know what is beautiful when I see it, and I am thoroughly content with this.'

'Indeed, who could help being contented!' said the elder Miss Robinson; and Mr Sandbach said the same.

'Ah!' said Leyland, 'you all confuse the artistic view of Nature with the photographic.'

Poor Rose had brought her camera with her, so I thought this positively rude. I did not wish any unpleasantness; so I merely turned away and assisted my wife and Miss Mary Robinson to put out the lunch – not a very nice lunch.

'Eustace dear,' said his aunt, 'come and help us here.'

He was in a particularly bad temper that morning. He had, as usual, not wanted to come, and his aunts had nearly allowed him to stop at the hotel to vex Janet. But I, with their permission, spoke to him rather sharply on the subject of exercise; and the result was that he had come, but was even

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more taciturn and moody than usual.

Obedience was not his strong point. He invariably questioned every command, and only executed it grumbling. I should always insist on prompt and cheerful obedience, if I had a son.

'I'm - coming - Aunt - Mary,' he at last replied, and dawdled to cut a piece of wood to make a whistle, taking care not to arrive till we had finished.

'Well, well, sir!' said I, 'you stroll in at the end and profit by our labours.' He sighed, for he could not endure being chaffed. Miss Mary, very unwisely, insisted on giving him the wing of the chicken, in spite of all my attempts to prevent her. I remember that I had a moment's vexation when I thought that, instead of enjoying the sun, and the air, and the woods, we were all engaged in wrangling over the diet of a spoilt boy.

But, after lunch, he was a little less in evidence. He withdrew to a tree trunk, and began to loosen the bark from his whistle. I was thankful to see him employed, for once in a way. We reclined, and took a *dolce far niente*.

Those sweet chestnuts of the South are puny striplings compared with our robust Northerners. But they clothed the contours of the hills and valleys in a most pleasing way, their veil being only broken by two clearings, in one of which we were sitting.

And because these few trees were cut down, Leyland burst into a petty indictment of the proprietor.

'All the poetry is going from Nature,' he cried, 'her lakes and marshes are drained, her seas banked up, her forests cut down. Everywhere we see the vulgarity of desolation spreading.'

I have had some experience of estates, and answered that cutting was very necessary for the health of the larger trees. Besides, it was unreasonable to expect the proprietor to derive no income from his lands.

'If you take the commercial side of landscape, you may feel

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pleasure in the owner's activity. But to me the mere thought that a tree is convertible into cash is disgusting.'

'I see no reason,' I observed politely, 'to despise the gifts of Nature because they are of value.'

It did not stop him. 'It is no matter,' he went on, 'we are all hopelessly steeped in vulgarity. I do not except myself. It is through us, and to our shame, that the Nereids have left the waters and the Oreads the mountains, that the woods no longer give shelter to Pan.'

'Pan!' cried Mr Sandbach, his mellow voice filling the valley as if it had been a great green church, 'Pan is dead. That is why the woods do not shelter him.' And he began to tell the striking story of the mariners who were sailing near the coast at the time of the birth of Christ, and three times heard a loud voice saying: 'The great God Pan is dead.'

'Yes. The great God Pan is dead,' said Leyland. And he abandoned himself to that mock misery in which artistic people are so fond of indulging. His cigar went out, and he had to ask me for a match.

'How very interesting,' said Rose. 'I do wish I knew some ancient history.'

'It is not worth your notice,' said Mr Sandbach. 'Eh, Eustace?'

Eustace was finishing his whistle. He looked up, with the irritable frown in which his aunts allowed him to indulge, and made no reply.

The conversation turned to various topics and then died out. It was a cloudless afternoon in May, and the pale green of the young chestnut leaves made a pretty contrast with the dark blue of the sky. We were all sitting at the edge of the small clearing for the sake of the view, and the shade of the chestnut saplings behind us was manifestly insufficient. All sounds died away – at least that is my account: Miss Robinson says that the clamour of the birds was the first sign of uneasiness that she discerned. All sounds died away, except that, far

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in the distance, I could hear two boughs of a great chestnut grinding together as the tree swayed. The grinds grew shorter and shorter, and finally that sound stopped also. As I looked over the green fingers of the valley, everything was absolutely motionless and still; and that feeling of suspense which one so often experiences when Nature is in repose began to steal over me.

Suddenly we were all electrified by the excruciating noise of Eustace's whistle. I never heard any instrument give forth so ear-splitting and discordant a sound.

'Eustace dear,' said Miss Mary Robinson, 'you might have thought of your poor Aunt Julia's head.'

Leyland, who had apparently been asleep, sat up.

'It is astonishing how blind a boy is to anything that is elevating or beautiful,' he observed. 'I should not have thought he could have found the wherewithal out here to spoil our pleasure like this.'

Then the terrible silence fell upon us again. I was now standing up and watching a cat's-paw of wind that was running down one of the ridges opposite, turning the light green to dark as it travelled. A fanciful feeling of foreboding came over me; so I turned away, to find to my amazement, that all the others were also on their feet, watching it too.

It is not possible to describe coherently what happened next: but I, for one, am not ashamed to confess that, though the fair blue sky was above me, and the green spring woods beneath me, and the kindest of friends around me, yet I became terribly frightened, more frightened than I ever wish to become again, frightened in a way I never have known either before or after. And in the eyes of the others, too, I saw blank, expressionless fear, while their mouths strove in vain to speak and their hands to gesticulate. Yet, all around us were prosperity, beauty, and peace, and all was motionless, save the cat's-paw of wind, now travelling up the ridge on which we stood.

Who moved first has never been settled. It is enough to say that in one second we were tearing away along the hillside. Leyland was in front, then Mr Sandbach, then my wife. But I only saw for a brief moment; for I ran across the little clearing and through the woods and over the undergrowth and the rocks and down the dry torrent beds into the valley below. The sky might have been black as I ran, and the trees, short grass, and the hillside a level road; for I saw nothing and heard nothing and felt nothing, since all the channels of sense and reason were blocked. It was not the spiritual fear that one has known at other times, but brutal, overmastering, physical fear, stopping up the ears, and dropping clouds before the eyes, and filling the mouth with foul tastes. And it was no ordinary humiliation that survived; for I had been afraid, not as a man, but as a beast.

II

I CANNOT describe our finish any better than our start; for our fear passed away as it had come, without cause. Suddenly I was able to see, and hear, and cough, and clear my mouth. Looking back, I saw that the others were stopping too; and, in a short time, we were all together, though it was long before we could speak, and longer before we dared to.

No one was seriously injured. My poor wife had sprained her ankle, Leyland had torn one of his nails on a tree trunk, and I myself had scraped and damaged my ear. I never noticed it till I had stopped.

We were all silent, searching one another's faces. Suddenly Miss Mary Robinson gave a terrible shriek. 'Oh, merciful heavens! where is Eustace?' And then she would have fallen if Mr Sandbach had not caught her.

'We must go back, we must go back at once,' said my Rose, who was quite the most collected of the party. 'But I hope - I feel he is safe.'

Such was the cowardice of Leyland, that he objected. But, finding himself in a minority, and being afraid of being left alone, he gave in. Rose and I supported my poor wife, Mr Sandbach and Miss Robinson helped Miss Mary, and we returned slowly and silently, taking forty minutes to ascend the path that we had descended in ten.

Our conversation was naturally disjointed, as no one wished to offer an opinion on what had happened. Rose was the most talkative: she startled us all by saying that she had very nearly stopped where she was.

'Do you mean to say that you weren't – that you didn't feel compelled to go?' said Mr Sandbach.

'Oh, of course, I did feel frightened' – she was the first to use the word – 'but I somehow felt that if I could stop on it would be quite different, that I shouldn't be frightened at all, so to speak.' Rose never did express herself clearly: still, it is greatly to her credit that she, the youngest of us, should have held on so long at that terrible time.

'I should have stopped, I do believe,' she continued, 'if I had not seen mamma go.'

Rose's experience comforted us a little about Eustace. But a feeling of terrible foreboding was on us all as we painfully climbed the chestnut-covered slopes and neared the little clearing. When we reached it our tongues broke loose. There, at the farther side, were the remains of our lunch, and close to them, lying motionless on his back, was Eustace.

With some presence of mind I at once cried out: 'Hey, you young monkey! jump up!' But he made no reply, nor did he answer when his poor aunts spoke to him. And, to my unspeakable horror, I saw one of those green lizards dart out from under his shirt-cuff as we approached.

We stood watching him as he lay there so silently, and my ears began to tingle in expectation of the outbursts of lamentations and tears.

Miss Mary fell on her knees beside him and touched his