

# A SEVEN SEAS AMPIER

A Collection  
of Short Stories by Nineteenth Century  
British Authors

Sir Walter Scott · Charles Dickens  
Elizabeth Gaskell · George Eliot  
Anthony Trollope · Oscar Wilde  
Thomas Hardy · George Gissing  
Robert Louis Stevenson

V E N S E A S B O O K S





*Briefly,*  
ABOUT THE BOOK

Back in the nineteenth century when novel writing was born in England, a new outlet for this form mushroomed into being: the literary magazines. Along with them came the need for short stories. So it is that we find British writers, the great and the small, turning their skill, invention and talents to the telling of a tale. Nine of the great authors of that century are represented by exciting stories in this new Seven Seas anthology. They write of their England, of the happenings sometimes whimsical, sometimes tragic; now filled with good will, now with the bitter poverty of the time; often gay, often naïve; but all of it stimulating reading and a treat for the short-story fan. Here the gifts that made for great novels are to be found in microcosm, spinning out enduring tales...



# SEVEN SEAS BOOKS

A Collection of Works by Writers in the English Language

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## A SEVEN SEAS SAMPLER

*Nineteenth Century British Short Stories*



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Sir Walter Scott  
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George Gissing

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## INTRODUCTION

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The short story makes no claim to tell the whole truth about anything. Instead, the short story is more like the splinters of a mirror, each catching in its bright and jagged shard a different and sometimes contradictory fragment of a larger truth, a wider picture of a man, a city or perhaps a century.

The century in our book is the nineteenth, the country is England – Merrie Olde England: the faded cosiness of stagecoaches on a vellum lampshade, a land of pewter tankards and country inns, of abundant ale, mutton chops and stout gentlemen with pink cheeks and pink coats.

There were still plenty of stagecoaches and ale when the nineteenth century began, but railroads and revolutions eclipsed them for the average Englishman. Laurence Sterne and Henry Fielding had used short narratives within their novels – tales with no immediate bearing on the plot itself; but the first short stories as we now know them were the Gothic horror tales so popular with early readers. These, together with the clever antique forgeries of Celtic and Anglo-Saxon epics, plus a revived love of the Natural (after a century of cool, peruked rationalism) prepared the way for Walter Scott. Mark Twain once testily deplored the deadening influence of Scott on later literature in the United States as well as in Europe (English critics subsequently paid him back by damning the malignant, commercialising effect of O. Henry's stories on English writers). Yet the fact remains

that Scott, together with Byron, shared a vogue unmatched by any other English writer except Shakespeare.

He is the legitimate forefather of the swashbucklers; to entertain seems to have been Scott's intention and one in which he was amply rewarded in fame and prosperity. "The Two Drovers", which is included in this volume, is set in the Scottish border region whose legends had kindled Scott's heart even as a child. It typifies the chivalric ideals and rugged individualism which were blown into immense popularity by the winds of Romanticism in early nineteenth-century England.

Meanwhile, undisturbed by these fresh winds circulating above his head, the ordinary Englishman was preoccupied with inventions, factories, making money or simply making a living. The French Revolution, a channel width away, had either kindled individual passions for freedom of many sorts or else it had deepened within his average, well-to-do, British soul his satisfaction with the status quo. Jane Austen probably reflected more accurately the general euphoria of her readers than did the Romantics.

But a more important by-product of the Romantics, which expressed itself strongly in poetry, was an awakening social consciousness. There was a growing tendency, still rooted in the eighteenth-century belief in man's natural goodness, to blame the evil man commits on his environment. There were evils galore to confound the complacency of John Bull – the prisons and work-houses, the legal system and factories. Dickens was their most famous prosecutor.

To read through Dickens's short stories, especially *Sketches by Boz* which were among his earliest works (and of which he himself was rather critical later), is to discover the antecedents of characters whom we meet in subsequent novels. Varieties of Scrooge appear fairly often; sometimes they reform, sometimes they don't, but they nourish a unanimous hatred of dogs, little children and common notions of happiness.

There are the thumb-nail characterisations:

*The Misses Crumpton were two unusually tall, particularly thin and exceedingly skinny personages: very upright and very yellow ... they dressed like twins and looked about as happy and comfortable as a couple of marigolds run to seed.*

Or this:

*Mrs. Kitterbell was ... one of those young women who almost invariably recall to one's mind the idea of a cold fillet of veal.*

One is tempted to collect them, like old pewter. Indeed, Dickens's England still remains definitive for many foreign readers. Coming to London, I suspect we would take to peering past the plate glass windows or eaves-dropping in the buses and tea shoppes in the hope of finding Sarah Gamp, or seeking restlessly among the country inns with their petrol lamps for a bootblack named Sam Weller, or for a provincial pillar of society named Mr. Pecksniff.

But his marvellous gift for caricature does not define his forcefulness. Dickens lived with his eyes and ears open. What mattered to his countrymen and in his world, mattered to him and found its place in his stories and novels. The tale of the Italian prisoner, reprinted here from *An Uncommercial Traveller*, finds us in unaccustomed territory but reveals Dickens's admiration – like that of Byron for the Greeks – for the Italian people whose striving for national unity was part of the upheaval that stirred the Europe of the mid-nineteenth century.

A Unitarian minister's wife from Manchester named Elizabeth Gaskell became a gifted chronicler of this time. Her style reminds us somewhat of Jane Austen, but the content of her books and stories marks her as a sensitive observer of a later decade. After reading her first novel, *Mary Barton*, Charles Dickens wrote to Mrs. Gaskell, asking her to contribute to his new publishing venture, *Household Words*, a magazine destined for fame. Its first

issue in 1850 carried the opening instalment of her second novel, *Lizzie Leigh*. Her warm-heartedness, her calm, lucid style and sincere piety are evident in *The Half-Brothers*. It is a well-known story on a well-known nineteenth century theme: the younger brother cheated out of an inheritance. It avoids the somewhat Sunday-School sentimentality which made other of her tales popular with her readers who, bearing up under the spirit of the day, probably enjoyed being uplifted.

Among the most prolific mid-Victorian writers was Anthony Trollope, who might be called a minor Thackeray. Writing for him was a business, not a mystic matter of leisured inspiration. He is said to have produced his daily stint of 250 words each morning with his big silver watch beside him. Just as Jane Austen's characters had been untouched by Romanticism, so Trollope's ladies and gentlemen – who might have been the former's grandchildren – were unruffled by the great changes going on outside his study windows, by the great Causes of Victorian England. His John Bull on a visit to Spain to claim his lady-love sounds like a typical as well as a pleasant, worthy fellow. Wouldn't it be interesting to read a contemporary short story which expends the same understated humanity and humour on an American visitor abroad with his excess baggage of condescension and awkwardness?

Like Dickens and Thackeray, Trollope worked as an editor, founding *The Fortnightly Review* and serving as first editor of *St. Paul's Magazine*. Those were great days in publishing, which had become a respectable and highly lucrative business. The *Edinburgh* and *Quarterly Reviews*, *Blackwoods*, *London Magazine*, *Cornhill* and *Household Words* provided an important stimulus for short-story writing. Like their American counterparts – and it is generally agreed the modern short story was first developed in the United States – they found the form better suited to the periodical than the serialisation

of novels. The latter, nevertheless, remained the magazines' financial mainstays. *Mid-Victorian* conjures up for us images of aspidistras and a thousand thousand shall-nots upholstered in red plush and fringe. Yet behind the desperate, ironclad respectability, a tremendous change was in progress. The ruddy confidence so typical of English letters during the first half of the century, and best personified in Dickens and Thackeray, was passing. We, who are familiar with the cosy notion of togetherness and grey flannel conformity preached in a setting of mid-twentieth century prosperity, may find much that is akin in the England of a hundred years before. There, Mrs. Grundy, unseen fictional tyrant ("What will Mrs. Grundy say?"), froze out any expression of individuality in thought, in action or in taste to produce a standardised society distinguished by its mediocrity. This seems to have been the stuffy intellectual climate of those years as industrialisation transformed cities, mill towns and their environs and Merrie Olde England took on a different aspect and with it, her people and her literature.

Another shattering blow sustained by thinking people in the post mid-century (and one which we're apt to underestimate) was Charles Darwin's revelations. When we consider what such a scientific and philosophical bomb-shell meant in the midst of comfortable Victorian conservatism (fissured already, it is true, by hypocrisy and a partial recognition of the sufferings of the less fortunate) we can get in better focus those later bomb-shells of our own century - revolutions and revelations of different kinds in the realm of physics, psychology and politics which, for many, went further to cancel out a universe either God-centred or good-centred. This may throw some light upon an important section of our contemporary literature which often seems to snuffle rather than to weep, to snicker rather than to laugh, to whimper rather than to speak.

Darwin's findings destroyed religious faith for many sincere Christians, causing torment to sensitive and pious souls. Among them was George Eliot. She lived in a period of perplexity and despite the fact that she was one of the century's major prose writers, she did not command the devoted and broad audience that Dickens had won earlier. The undercurrent of disillusion and pessimism, even of a certain morbidity, is particularly evident in "The Lifted Veil", a curious story which, despite its extreme wordiness, is striking for its psychological modernity which derives, I think, from the quantities of introspection, its dim, twilight mood.

Considering the literary climate of England during the 1870's Hugh Walpole once recalled nostalgically that the "very Englishness" of earlier novels had disappeared as well as their healthy physical-ness "aglow with fire-light or sunlight" (speaking of Jane Austen, now). Once the glass was shattered into myriad splinters, numerous saviours arose in awful earnestness to propound their various brands of salvation. In a climate of such earnestness, humour naturally got squeezed out. People still laughed, of course, but nonsense in great part took the place of genuine wit. Dickens and Thackeray, they say, wept when they killed off a character, and bought wine and celebrated a wedding or other good fortune of their characters with a party.

Reading what was written in the last decades of the century gives one the feeling of moving into a low pressure area, so to speak. Through the 70's and 80's, writers seem to have been too busy coping with the increased complexities and contradictions of their own lives to produce anything memorable. Charles Reade, for instance, spent five hours a day collecting documentation on all sorts of social topics in order to write reform novels and plays. Plots swelled in importance and so did melodrama.

We have come to the *fin de siècle* which produced two flowers: the lush bloom of Decadence, and Realism, the



fore-runner of Naturalism. For both, strong influences came from France – from Mallarmé and Rimbaud, Baudelaire and Verlaine, from Flaubert, Gautier and Emile Zola. Writers of the not-so-Gay-Nineties had no H-bombs or strontium fall-out to worry about, so we may wonder at this soul sickness. Yet it was a period of feverish restlessness and blunted discouragement, discoloured by a feeling of imminent death.

Most prominent of “art for art’s sake” disciples was Oscar Wilde, who owed a debt not only to the French poets but also to the pre-Raphaelites and their earlier revolt against the Victorian philistines. Emerging from the unaired, cluttered parlour aura of those days, we can better understand the appeal of the early Decadents, published in *Yellow Book*, *Savoy* and other bright and short-lived lamps that drew such bizarre moths to their ambered beams. These stories, poems and graphic work were protests, in a way, against the heavy morality that had threatened to choke English art and letters for almost two decades. Oscar Wilde, most prominent of these Decadents, followed the high priests of aestheticism to become an elegant, Edwardian Beatnik – but a fastidious craftsman who enjoyed immense popularity until his morals trial destroyed him and with it, the Decadent movement itself. “Sphinx Without A Secret”, taken from *Lord Savile’s Crime and Other Stories*, is not such a tour de force of languid and luscious language as the Savile tale or as *Dorian Gray*, but the dilemma of the pathetic and lovely lady, imprisoned in fashion and bored to the point of an amour with mystery itself, is intriguing. Boiled down, the essence of Oscar Wilde is no longer very original or exciting. Yet reading him – in short doses – is a tonic after today’s quantities of drab language, stimulating us to see and smell and taste and feel with unjaded senses and with revived delight.

If Wilde’s stories and those of his disciples were protests against the smugness of Victorian England, then

quite another and more explicit form of protest was voiced by the realists and naturalists. Thomas Hardy leads the list. He had stoically accepted the doctrine of evolution and its philosophical implications. Recognising his stature as a writer and as a truth-teller, we are all the more struck in reading through his short stories by how the world has changed between Dickens's day and his own. The sun's gone under, we feel.

Hardy paid a great deal of attention to women and what he clearly felt was their inferior, under-privileged role in English society. In his time, he was quite frank about sex (although even during the depths of Grundyism, such respectable writers as Mrs. Gaskell and George Eliot risked public displeasure by treating with compassion the problems of erring women) and his women, with their half-articulate desire for emancipation, are real people, neither China dolls nor supporting character actresses heavy with grease paint and putty noses.

Just as the *Yellow Book* became a symbol with the high-brow for *fin de siècle*, so with the ordinary Englishman, the Yellow Press became another. Both reflect his nervous excitability during the 1890's, his thirst for sensation which reached its climax in Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee. As the century drew to a close with a brassy fanfare of jingoism and imperial complacency, Rudyard Kipling reached his pinnacle as its laureate. His loyal supporters founded a Kipling Society with the aim of honouring and extending the influence of "the most patriotic, virile and imaginative of writers who upholds the ideals of the English-speaking world". Kipling's historically fortified conviction of Anglo-Saxon superiority, formed in far-off India, suffered a jolt on his return to England. Strict discipline and a stern sense of responsibility were the only salvation, Kipling believed, for fellow countrymen grown flabby with urban living, extremes of self-indulgence and poverty. He cannot be considered only as a popular literary prophet of the "white

man's burden" – he was an excellent story-teller in an era of excellent story-tellers.

Among these latter, Robert Louis Stevenson was exceptional, being neither an Angry Young Man of his century nor an ardent waver of the Union Jack. In a time of strong literary partisanship and strident nationalism, he was an anomaly – a thoroughly emancipated man whose humanity cut through national lines. This much-travelled writer was as fully at home in France, California or Papua as in his native Scotland. The healthy vigour of his writings, particularly his adventure stories and travelogues, are all the more remarkable since Stevenson was suffering with tuberculosis during most of his adult life and to write at all must have often been an act of sheer will. "Lodging for a Night", which depicts an episode from the life of the legendary François Villon, seemed to this reader the best example of Stevenson's delightfully urbane and civilised attitude toward men and morals.

As the nineteenth century bordered upon the twentieth, short stories became an important literary form. A survey of authors' names illustrates the wide choice possible for a wind-up to a collection such as ours: Joseph Conrad, H. G. Wells, Arthur Morrison, Saki, the three Georges – Meredith, Moore and Gissing. Although these span the end of the one and the beginning of the next century, in spirit they more properly belong to the twentieth than the nineteenth.

We have chosen one of these to conclude our book: George Gissing, whose "A Charming Family" reflects the author's bitter awareness of the pressures to which human nature is exposed.

Of the other Georges, Moore was an expatriate Irishman who lived most of his later life in France and eventually adopted French as his literary language; he is the major representative of Naturalism. Moore was important to England because he introduced Verlaine and Rimbaud