

SIX SHORT STORIES

by

*Famous British Authors of the
Last Hundred Years*

RETOLD BY

E. F. DODD, B.A.

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PREFACE

It is not always easy, or even possible, for a student to dip widely into foreign literature, as he has neither access to many lesser-known books nor time to read them. For this reason, it was thought that a volume of selected stories from six famous English authors would provide at least a fleeting introduction to individual themes and concepts.

This book has been specially adapted for those for whom English is a second or foreign language, and who have reached at least a lower intermediate level. It will be suitable, in fact, for anyone who finds the original book too long or too difficult.

Difficult sentence structures have been avoided, though every effort has been made to retain something of the style of the original.

E. F. D.

CONTENTS

		Page
THE BAGMAN'S STORY	<i>Charles Dickens</i>	7
MALACHI'S COVE	<i>Anthony Trollope</i>	22
THE FISHERMAN AND HIS SOUL	<i>Oscar Wilde</i>	40
THE BOTTLE IMP	<i>Robert Louis Stevenson</i>	57
THE MELANCHOLY HUSSAR OF THE GERMAN LEGION	<i>Thomas Hardy</i>	78
THE COUNTRY OF THE BLIND	<i>H. G. Wells</i>	94
NOTES AND QUESTIONS		108



A man in a small carriage urging his tired horse

THE BAGMAN'S STORY

Adapted from the story by

CHARLES DICKENS

ONE winter's evening, about five o'clock, just as it began to grow dark, a man in a small carriage might have been seen urging his tired horse along the road which leads across Marlborough Downs, in the direction of Bristol. I say he might have been seen; but the weather was so bad, and the night so cold and wet, that nothing was out of doors except the water, and so the traveller rode wearily

along in the middle of the road, and met nobody. Any bagman would have known that this traveller was Tom Smart, of the firm of Bilson and Slum, Cateaton Street, London; but there was no bagman to look on, so nobody knew anything at all about the matter. And so Tom Smart and his clay-coloured carriage with the red wheels, and the bad-tempered horse with the fast pace, went on together, and nobody was a bit the wiser.

There are many pleasanter places, even in this sad world, than Marlborough Downs when the wind blows hard; and that night the wind blew—not up the road or down it, but straight across it. It rushed over the hill-tops, and swept along the plain, gathering sound and strength as it drew nearer, until it dashed heavily against horse and man, driving the sharp rain into their ears. Its cold damp breath seemed to strike their very bones.

The horse splashed through the mud and water with drooping ears, until a sudden gust of wind, stronger than any that had yet attacked them, caused her to stop and plant her four feet firmly against the ground, to prevent her being blown over. It is a mercy that she did this, for if she *had* been blown over, she was so light, the carriage was so light, and Tom Smart such a light weight, too, that they would certainly have all gone rolling over and over together.

‘Well, damn my straps and whiskers,’ said Tom

Smart (Tom had some very peculiar expressions), 'damn my straps and whiskers, this isn't pleasant at all! It won't do to go riding any further on a night like this. We'll stop at the first house we come to.' He patted the horse on the neck with the end of his whip. 'So hurry up, old girl. The faster you go, the sooner it will all be over.'

As soon as Tom had finished speaking, the horse pricked up her ears and started forward at a speed which made the clay-coloured carriage rattle, and even Tom couldn't stop her until she drew up, of her own accord, in front of a roadside inn about a quarter of a mile from the end of the Downs.

Tom threw a hasty glance at the house as he jumped from his carriage and gave the reins to a servant. It was a strange old place, with a low dark door and a couple of steep steps leading down into the house, instead of the usual half-a-dozen shallow ones leading up to it. It was a comfortable-looking place, though, for there was a strong cheerful light in the bar window, which threw a bright ray across the road and even lighted up the hedge on the other side. And there was a red, flickering light in the opposite window, and Tom guessed that there was a fine big fire burning inside.

He entered the house, and in less than five minutes he was sitting comfortably in the room opposite the bar, warming himself beside a roaring

fire. A smartly-dressed girl, with a bright eye and a neat ankle, was laying a very clean white cloth on the table. From where he sat, Tom could see into the bar, and there ~~seated~~ seated at the nicest possible little table, having tea in front of the brightest possible little fire—was a smiling widow of about forty-eight years old. She was evidently the landlady of the house. There was only one disadvantage to the beauty of the whole picture, and this was a tall man—a very tall man—in a brown coat who was seated at tea with the widow.

Now, Tom Smart was by no means an irritable or envious man, but somehow the tall man with the brown coat made him feel extremely annoyed. It was so obvious that the man was determined to persuade the handsome widow to be a widow no longer. ‘What business has he in that comfortable bar?’ Tom said to himself. ‘Such an ugly fellow, too!’

Tom Smart had always had an ambition to own a country inn, to stand in a bar of his own and serve his customers with drinks. He felt very properly indignant that the tall man seemed very close to owning such an excellent house, while he, Tom Smart, was as far off from it as ever. Tom sat by the fire drinking several glasses of wine and wondering how he could start a quarrel with the tall man; and by the time he went to bed he had decided that he was a very ill-used and unlucky fellow.

His bedroom was a good large room with big upboards, and a bed which might have served for a whole boarding-school; but what struck Tom's fancy most was a strange, grim-looking, high-backed chair, carved in the most unusual manner. It had a flowered silk cushion, and the round knobs at the bottom of the legs were carefully tied up in red cloth. There was something about the chair which fascinated Tom; it was so odd and so unlike any other piece of furniture he had ever seen. He sat down by the fire and stared at the old chair for half an hour. He simply could not take his eyes off it.

At last he began to undress slowly, looking at the old chair all the time. 'I never saw such a queer chair in all my days. Very odd,' he said, shaking his head a dozen times. 'Very odd indeed!' And he looked at the chair again, and then got into bed, covered himself with the blankets, and fell asleep.

In about half an hour Tom woke up, with a start, from a confused dream of tall men and glasses of wine; and the first thing he saw was the queer chair. 'I won't look at it any more,' said Tom to himself, and he closed his eyes and tried to go to sleep again. But it was no use. Queer chairs danced before his eyes, kicking up their legs, jumping over each other's backs, and playing all kinds of tricks.

'I might as well see one real chair instead of three complete sets of false ones,' said Tom crossly, and he opened his eyes once more. There was the old chair, plainly visible by the light of the fire.

Tom looked at it, and suddenly it seemed to change in the most extraordinary way. The carving of the back gradually turned into an old, wrinkled, human face; the silk cushion became a flowered waistcoat; the round knobs turned into a couple of feet, encased in red cloth slippers; and the old chair looked like a very ugly old man of the previous century, standing with his arms on his hips. Tom sat up in bed and rubbed his eyes. He looked again. Yes—the chair was an ugly old gentleman; and what was more, he was winking at Tom Smart.

Tom was naturally a cheerful, carefree sort of fellow, and he had had a good many glasses of wine that night; so, although he was a little surprised at first, he soon began to grow annoyed at the old gentleman for winking and nodding at him. At last he said in a very angry tone: 'What the devil are you winking at me for?'

'Because I want to, Tom Smart,' said the chair, or the old gentleman, whichever you like to call him. However, he stopped winking when Tom spoke and began smiling like an aged monkey.

'How do you know my name?' Tom Smart asked in astonishment.



‘How do you know my name?’ Tom Smart asked in astonishment.

‘Ah, I know everything about you, Tom; everything,’ answered the chair wisely. ‘For instance, I know that you’re very poor, Tom.’

‘I certainly am,’ said Tom Smart. ‘But how did you know that?’

‘Never mind that,’ said the old gentleman. ‘I also know that you’re much too fond of wine, Tom.’

Tom Smart was going to say that he hadn’t tasted a drop since his last birthday, but his eye met that of the old gentleman and he looked so knowing that Tom blushed and was silent.

‘Tom,’ said the old gentleman, ‘the widow’s a fine woman, isn’t she, Tom?’ He winked his eye again, and added: ‘I am her guardian, Tom.’

‘Are you?’ said Tom Smart.

‘I knew her mother, Tom,’ said the old fellow; ‘and her grandmother. She was very fond of me—she made me this waistcoat.’

‘Did she?’ said Tom Smart.

‘And these shoes,’ said the old fellow, lifting up one of the red cloth slippers. He nodded his head knowingly. ‘I have been a great favourite among the women in my time,’ he said. ‘Hundreds of fine women have sat on my knee for hours together. What do you think of that, eh?’ The old gentleman was beginning to tell some of the adventures of his youth when he was seized with such a violent fit of creaking that he was unable to go on.

‘It just serves you right, old boy,’ thought Tom Smart; but he didn’t say anything.

‘Ah!’ said the old fellow, ‘I am a good deal troubled with these creaking joints now. I am getting old, Tom, and have lost nearly all my rails. I have had an operation performed, too—a small piece let into my back—and I found it a severe trial, Tom.’

‘I’m sure you did, sir,’ said Tom Smart.

‘However,’ said the old gentleman, ‘that’s not the point. Tom! I want you to marry the widow.’

‘Me, sir!’ exclaimed Tom.

‘You,’ said the old gentleman.

‘Bless your heart, sir,’ said Tom, although he didn’t know where the old gentleman kept his

heart, 'bless your heart, she wouldn't have me.'

'Wouldn't she?' said the old gentleman firmly.

'No, no,' said Tom. 'There's someone else she's interested in. A tall man—a very tall man—with black whiskers.'

'Tom,' said the old gentleman, 'she will never have him.'

'Won't she?' said Tom. 'If you stood in the bar, old gentleman, you would tell another story.'

'Oh, I know all about that,' said the old gentleman with a laugh.

'About what?' asked Tom.

'The kissing behind the door, and all that sort of thing, Tom,' said the old gentleman. 'I know all about that. I've seen it happen very often in my time, Tom, between more people than I should like to mention to you. But it never comes to anything after all.'

'You must have seen some queer things,' said Tom.

'You may say that, Tom,' replied the old fellow, with an enormous wink. 'I am the last of my family,' he added, sighing.

'Was it a large one?' asked Tom Smart.

'There were twelve of us, Tom,' said the old gentleman. 'Fine, straight-backed, handsome fellows we were, too.'

'And what's happened to the others, sir?' asked Tom Smart.

The old gentleman wiped a tear from his eye as he replied: 'Gone, Tom, gone. They got rheumatic about the arms and legs, and went into kitchens and other hospitals.' The old fellow paused for a few minutes, evidently struggling with his grief, and then went on: 'However, I am wandering from the point. This tall fellow, Tom, is a rascally adventurer. The moment he married the widow, he would sell all the furniture and run away. She would be deserted and ruined, and I should catch my death of cold in some furniture-dealer's shop.'

'Yes, but—'

'Don't interrupt me,' said the old gentleman. 'I well know that you, Tom, if you settled here, would never leave the place as long as there was anything to drink in the house.'

'Thank you for your good opinion, sir,' said Tom Smart.

'Therefore,' went on the old gentleman, 'you shall have her, and he shall not.'

'How can that be arranged?' asked Tom eagerly.

'By the fact that he is already married,' replied the old gentleman.

'How can I prove it?' asked Tom, jumping half out of bed.

The old gentleman untucked his arm from his side, and, having pointed to one of the big cupboards, immediately replaced his arm in its old