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*** START OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK BEST RUSSIAN SHORT
STORIES ***

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[Illustration: ANTON P. CHEKHOV, RUSSIA'S GREATEST SHORT-STORY
WRITER]

BEST RUSSIAN SHORT STORIES

Compiled and Edited by THOMAS SELTZER

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INTRODUCTION

Conceive the joy of a lover of nature who, leaving the art galleries, wanders out among the trees and wild flowers and birds that the pictures of the galleries have sentimentalised. It is some such joy that the man who truly loves the noblest in letters feels when tasting for the first time the simple delights of Russian literature. French and English and German authors, too, occasionally, offer works of

lofty, simple naturalness; but the very keynote to the whole of Russian literature is simplicity, naturalness, veraciousness.

Another essentially Russian trait is the quite unaffected conception that the lowly are on a plane of equality with the so-called upper classes. When the Englishman Dickens wrote with his profound pity and understanding of the poor, there was yet a bit; of remoteness, perhaps, even, a bit of caricature, in his treatment of them. He showed their sufferings to the rest of the world with a "Behold how the other half lives!" The Russian writes of the poor, as it were, from within, as one of them, with no eye to theatrical effect upon the well-to-do. There is no insistence upon peculiar virtues or vices. The poor are portrayed just as they are, as human beings like the rest of us. A democratic spirit is reflected, breathing a broad humanity, a true universality, an unstudied generosity that proceed not from the intellectual conviction that to understand all is to forgive all, but from an instinctive feeling that no man has the right to set himself up as a judge over another, that one can only observe and record.

In 1834 two short stories appeared, *The Queen of Spades*, by Pushkin, and *The Cloak*, by Gogol. The first was a finishing-off of the old, outgoing style of romanticism, the other was the beginning of the new, the characteristically Russian style. We read Pushkin's *Queen of Spades*, the first story in the volume, and the likelihood is we shall enjoy it greatly. "But why is it Russian?" we ask. The answer is, "It is not Russian." It might have been printed in an American magazine over the name of John Brown. But, now, take the very next story in the volume, *The Cloak*. "Ah," you exclaim, "a genuine Russian story, Surely. You cannot palm it off on me over the name of Jones or Smith." Why? Because *The Cloak* for the first time strikes that truly Russian note of deep sympathy with the disinherited. It is not yet wholly free from artificiality, and so is not yet typical of the purely realistic fiction that reached its perfected development in Turgenev and Tolstoy.

Though Pushkin heads the list of those writers who made the literature of their country world-famous, he was still a romanticist, in the universal literary fashion of his day. However, he already gave strong indication of the peculiarly Russian genius for naturalness or realism, and was a true Russian in his simplicity of style. In no sense an innovator, but taking the cue for his poetry from Byron and for his prose from the romanticism current at that period, he was not in advance of his age. He had a revolutionary streak in his nature, as his *Ode to Liberty* and other bits of verse and his intimacy with the Decembrist rebels show. But his youthful fire soon died down, and he found it possible to accommodate himself to the life of a Russian high functionary and courtier under the severe despot Nicholas I, though, to be sure, he always hated that life. For all his flirting with revolutionarism, he never displayed great originality or depth of thought. He was simply an extraordinarily gifted author, a perfect

versifier, a wondrous lyrist, and a delicious raconteur, endowed with a grace, ease and power of expression that delighted even the exacting artistic sense of Turgenev. To him aptly applies the dictum of Socrates: "Not by wisdom do the poets write poetry, but by a sort of genius and inspiration." I do not mean to convey that as a thinker Pushkin is to be despised. Nevertheless, it is true that he would occupy a lower position in literature did his reputation depend upon his contributions to thought and not upon his value as an artist.

"We are all descended from Gogol's *_Cloak_*," said a Russian writer. And Dostoyevsky's novel, *_Poor People_*, which appeared ten years later, is, in a way, merely an extension of Gogol's shorter tale. In Dostoyevsky, indeed, the passion for the common people and the all-embracing, all-penetrating pity for suffering humanity reach their climax. He was a profound psychologist and delved deeply into the human soul, especially in its abnormal and diseased aspects. Between scenes of heart-rending, abject poverty, injustice, and wrong, and the torments of mental pathology, he managed almost to exhaust the whole range of human woe. And he analysed this misery with an intensity of feeling and a painstaking regard for the most harrowing details that are quite upsetting to normally constituted nerves. Yet all the horrors must be forgiven him because of the motive inspiring them--an overpowering love and the desire to induce an equal love in others. It is not horror for horror's sake, not a literary *_tour de force_*, as in Poe, but horror for a high purpose, for purification through suffering, which was one of the articles of Dostoyevsky's faith.

Following as a corollary from the love and pity for mankind that make a leading element in Russian literature, is a passionate search for the means of improving the lot of humanity, a fervent attachment to social ideas and ideals. A Russian author is more ardently devoted to a cause than an American short-story writer to a plot. This, in turn, is but a reflection of the spirit of the Russian people, especially of the intellectuals. The Russians take literature perhaps more seriously than any other nation. To them books are not a mere diversion. They demand that fiction and poetry be a true mirror of life and be of service to life. A Russian author, to achieve the highest recognition, must be a thinker also. He need not necessarily be a finished artist. Everything is subordinated to two main requirements--humanitarian ideals and fidelity to life. This is the secret of the marvellous simplicity of Russian-literary art. Before the supreme function of literature, the Russian writer stands awed and humbled. He knows he cannot cover up poverty of thought, poverty of spirit and lack of sincerity by rhetorical tricks or verbal cleverness. And if he possesses the two essential requirements, the simplest language will suffice.

These qualities are exemplified at their best by Turgenev and Tolstoy. They both had a strong social consciousness; they both grappled with the problems of human welfare; they were both artists in the larger

sense, that is, in their truthful representation of life, Turgenev was an artist also in the narrower sense--in a keen appreciation of form. Thoroughly Occidental in his tastes, he sought the regeneration of Russia in radical progress along the lines of European democracy. Tolstoy, on the other hand, sought the salvation of mankind in a return to the primitive life and primitive Christian religion.

The very first work of importance by Turgenev, *_A Sportsman's Sketches_*, dealt with the question of serfdom, and it wielded tremendous influence in bringing about its abolition. Almost every succeeding book of his, from *_Rudin_* through *_Fathers and Sons_* to *_Virgin Soil_*, presented vivid pictures of contemporary Russian society, with its problems, the clash of ideas between the old and the new generations, and the struggles, the aspirations and the thoughts that engrossed the advanced youth of Russia; so that his collected works form a remarkable literary record of the successive movements of Russian society in a period of preparation, fraught with epochal significance, which culminated in the overthrow of Czarism and the inauguration of a new and true democracy, marking the beginning, perhaps, of a radical transformation the world over.

"The greatest writer of Russia." That is Turgenev's estimate of Tolstoy. "A second Shakespeare!" was Flaubert's enthusiastic outburst. The Frenchman's comparison is not wholly illuminating. The one point of resemblance between the two authors is simply in the tremendous magnitude of their genius. Each is a Colossus. Each creates a whole world of characters, from kings and princes and ladies to servants and maids and peasants. But how vastly divergent the angle of approach! Anna Karenina may have all the subtle womanly charm of an Olivia or a Portia, but how different her trials. Shakespeare could not have treated Anna's problems at all. Anna could not have appeared in his pages except as a sinning Gertrude, the mother of Hamlet. Shakespeare had all the prejudices of his age. He accepted the world as it is with its absurd moralities, its conventions and institutions and social classes. A gravedigger is naturally inferior to a lord, and if he is to be presented at all, he must come on as a clown. The people are always a mob, the rabble. Tolstoy, is the revolutionist, the iconoclast. He has the completest independence of mind. He utterly refuses to accept established opinions just because they are established. He probes into the right and wrong of things. His is a broad, generous universal democracy, his is a comprehensive sympathy, his an absolute incapacity to evaluate human beings according to station, rank or profession, or any standard but that of spiritual worth. In all this he was a complete contrast to Shakespeare. Each of the two men was like a creature of a higher world, possessed of supernatural endowments. Their omniscience of all things human, their insight into the hiddenmost springs of men's actions appear miraculous. But Shakespeare makes the impression of detachment from his works. The works do not reveal the man; while in Tolstoy the greatness of the man blends with the greatness of the genius. Tolstoy

was no mere oracle uttering profundities he wot not of. As the social, religious and moral tracts that he wrote in the latter period of his life are instinct with a literary beauty of which he never could divest himself, and which gave an artistic value even to his sermons, so his earlier novels show a profound concern for the welfare of society, a broad, humanitarian spirit, a bigness of soul that included prince and pauper alike.

Is this extravagant praise? Then let me echo William Dean Howells: "I know very well that I do not speak of Tolstoy's books in measured terms; I cannot."

The Russian writers so far considered have made valuable contributions to the short story; but, with the exception of Pushkin, whose reputation rests chiefly upon his poetry, their best work, generally, was in the field of the long novel. It was the novel that gave Russian literature its pre-eminence. It could not have been otherwise, since Russia is young as a literary nation, and did not come of age until the period at which the novel was almost the only form of literature that counted. If, therefore, Russia was to gain distinction in the world of letters, it could be only through the novel. Of the measure of her success there is perhaps no better testimony than the words of Matthew Arnold, a critic certainly not given to overstatement. "The Russian novel," he wrote in 1887, "has now the vogue, and deserves to have it... The Russian novelist is master of a spell to which the secret of human nature--both what is external and internal, gesture and manner no less than thought and feeling--willingly make themselves known... In that form of imaginative literature, which in our day is the most popular and the most possible, the Russians at the present moment seem to me to hold the field."

With the strict censorship imposed on Russian writers, many of them who might perhaps have contented themselves with expressing their opinions in essays, were driven to conceal their meaning under the guise of satire or allegory; which gave rise to a peculiar genre of literature, a sort of editorial or essay done into fiction, in which the satirist Saltykov, a contemporary of Turgenev and Dostoyevsky, who wrote under the pseudonym of Shchedrin, achieved the greatest success and popularity.

It was not however, until the concluding quarter of the last century that writers like Korolenko and Garshin arose, who devoted themselves chiefly to the cultivation of the short story. With Anton Chekhov the short story assumed a position of importance alongside the larger works of the great Russian masters. Gorky and Andreyev made the short story do the same service for the active revolutionary period in the last decade of the nineteenth century down to its temporary defeat in 1906 that Turgenev rendered in his series of larger novels for the period of preparation. But very different was the voice of Gorky, the man sprung from the people, the embodiment of all the accumulated

wrath and indignation of centuries of social wrong and oppression, from the gentlemanly tones of the cultured artist Turgenev. Like a mighty hammer his blows fell upon the decaying fabric of the old society. His was no longer a feeble, despairing protest. With the strength and confidence of victory he made onslaught upon onslaught on the old institutions until they shook and almost tumbled. And when reaction celebrated its short-lived triumph and gloom settled again upon his country and most of his co-fighters withdrew from the battle in despair, some returning to the old-time Russian mood of hopelessness, passivity and apathy, and some even backsliding into wild orgies of literary debauchery, Gorky never wavered, never lost his faith and hope, never for a moment was untrue to his principles. Now, with the revolution victorious, he has come into his right, one of the most respected, beloved and picturesque figures in the Russian democracy.

Kuprin, the most facile and talented short-story writer next to Chekhov, has, on the whole, kept well to the best literary traditions of Russia, though he has frequently wandered off to extravagant sex themes, for which he seems to display as great a fondness as Artzybashev. Semyonov is a unique character in Russian literature, a peasant who had scarcely mastered the most elementary mechanics of writing when he penned his first story. But that story pleased Tolstoy, who befriended and encouraged him. His tales deal altogether with peasant life in country and city, and have a lifelikeness, an artlessness, a simplicity striking even in a Russian author.

There is a small group of writers detached from the main current of Russian literature who worship at the shrine of beauty and mysticism. Of these Sologub has attained the highest reputation.

Rich as Russia has become in the short story, Anton Chekhov still stands out as the supreme master, one of the greatest short-story writers of the world. He was born in Taganarok, in the Ukraine, in 1860, the son of a peasant serf who succeeded in buying his freedom. Anton Chekhov studied medicine, but devoted himself largely to writing, in which, he acknowledged, his scientific training was of great service. Though he lived only forty-four years, dying of tuberculosis in 1904, his collected works consist of sixteen fair-sized volumes of short stories, and several dramas besides. A few volumes of his works have already appeared in English translation.

Critics, among them Tolstoy, have often compared Chekhov to Maupassant. I find it hard to discover the resemblance. Maupassant holds a supreme position as a short-story writer; so does Chekhov. But there, it seems to me, the likeness ends.

The chill wind that blows from the atmosphere created by the Frenchman's objective artistry is by the Russian commingled with the warm breath of a great human sympathy. Maupassant never tells where

his sympathies lie, and you don't know; you only guess. Chekhov does not tell you where his sympathies lie, either, but you know all the same; you don't have to guess. And yet Chekhov is as objective as Maupassant. In the chronicling of facts, conditions, and situations, in the reproduction of characters, he is scrupulously true, hard, and inexorable. But without obtruding his personality, he somehow manages to let you know that he is always present, always at hand. If you laugh, he is there to laugh with you; if you cry, he is there to shed a tear with you; if you are horrified, he is horrified, too. It is a subtle art by which he contrives to make one feel the nearness of himself for all his objectiveness, so subtle that it defies analysis. And yet it constitutes one of the great charms of his tales.

Chekhov's works show an astounding resourcefulness and versatility. There is no monotony, no repetition. Neither in incident nor in character are any two stories alike. The range of Chekhov's knowledge of men and things seems to be unlimited, and he is extravagant in the use of it. Some great idea which many a writer would consider sufficient to expand into a whole novel he disposes of in a story of a few pages. Take, for example, *Vanka*, apparently but a mere episode in the childhood of a nine-year-old boy; while it is really the tragedy of a whole life in its tempting glimpses into a past environment and ominous forebodings of the future--all contracted into the space of four or five pages. Chekhov is lavish with his inventiveness. Apparently, it cost him no effort to invent.

I have used the word inventiveness for lack of a better name. It expresses but lamely the peculiar faculty that distinguishes Chekhov. Chekhov does not really invent. He reveals. He reveals things that no author before him has revealed. It is as though he possessed a special organ which enabled him to see, hear and feel things of which we other mortals did not even dream the existence. Yet when he lays them bare we know that they are not fictitious, not invented, but as real as the ordinary familiar facts of life. This faculty of his playing on all conceivable objects, all conceivable emotions, no matter how microscopic, endows them with life and a soul. By virtue of this power *The Steppe*, an uneventful record of peasants travelling day after day through flat, monotonous fields, becomes instinct with dramatic interest, and its 125 pages seem all too short. And by virtue of the same attribute we follow with breathless suspense the minute description of the declining days of a great scientist, who feels his physical and mental faculties gradually ebbing away. *A Tiresome Story*, Chekhov calls it; and so it would be without the vitality conjured into it by the magic touch of this strange genius.

Divination is perhaps a better term than invention. Chekhov divines the most secret impulses of the soul, scents out what is buried in the subconscious, and brings it up to the surface. Most writers are specialists. They know certain strata of society, and when they venture beyond, their step becomes uncertain. Chekhov's material is

only delimited by humanity. He is equally at home everywhere. The peasant, the labourer, the merchant, the priest, the professional man, the scholar, the military officer, and the government functionary, Gentile or Jew, man, woman, or child--Chekhov is intimate with all of them. His characters are sharply defined individuals, not types. In almost all his stories, however short, the men and women and children who play a part in them come out as clear, distinct personalities. Ariadne is as vivid a character as Lilly, the heroine of Sudermann's *Song of Songs*; yet *Ariadne* is but a single story in a volume of stories. Who that has read *The Darling* can ever forget her--the woman who had no separate existence of her own, but thought the thoughts, felt the feelings, and spoke the words of the men she loved? And when there was no man to love any more, she was utterly crushed until she found a child to take care of and to love; and then she sank her personality in the boy as she had sunk it before in her husbands and lover, became a mere reflection of him, and was happy again.

In the compilation of this volume I have been guided by the desire to give the largest possible representation to the prominent authors of the Russian short story, and to present specimens characteristic of each. At the same time the element of interest has been kept in mind; and in a few instances, as in the case of Korolenko, the selection of the story was made with a view to its intrinsic merit and striking qualities rather than as typifying the writer's art. It was, of course, impossible in the space of one book to exhaust all that is best. But to my knowledge, the present volume is the most comprehensive anthology of the Russian short story in the English language, and gives a fair notion of the achievement in that field. All who enjoy good reading, I have no reason to doubt, will get pleasure from it, and if, in addition, it will prove of assistance to American students of Russian literature, I shall feel that the task has been doubly worth the while.

Korolenko's *Shades* and Andreyev's *Lazarus* first appeared in *Current Opinion*, and Artzybashev's *The Revolutionist* in the *Metropolitan Magazine*. I take pleasure in thanking Mr. Edward J. Wheeler, editor of *Current Opinion*, and Mr. Carl Hovey, editor of the *Metropolitan Magazine*, for permission to reprint them.

[Signature: Thomas Seltzer]

"Everything is subordinated to two main requirements--humanitarian ideals and fidelity to life. This is the secret of the marvellous simplicity of Russian literary art."--THOMAS SELTZER.

BEST RUSSIAN SHORT STORIES

THE QUEEN OF SPADES

BY ALEXSANDR S. PUSHKIN

I

There was a card party at the rooms of Narumov of the Horse Guards. The long winter night passed away imperceptibly, and it was five o'clock in the morning before the company sat down to supper. Those who had won, ate with a good appetite; the others sat staring absently at their empty plates. When the champagne appeared, however, the conversation became more animated, and all took a part in it.

"And how did you fare, Surin?" asked the host.

"Oh, I lost, as usual. I must confess that I am unlucky: I play mirandole, I always keep cool, I never allow anything to put me out, and yet I always lose!"

"And you did not once allow yourself to be tempted to back the red?... Your firmness astonishes me."

"But what do you think of Hermann?" said one of the guests, pointing to a young Engineer: "he has never had a card in his hand in his life, he has never in, his life laid a wager, and yet he sits here till five o'clock in the morning watching our play."

"Play interests me very much," said Hermann: "but I am not in the position to sacrifice the necessary in the hope of winning the superfluous."

"Hermann is a German: he is economical--that is all!" observed Tomsy. "But if there is one person that I cannot understand, it is my grandmother, the Countess Anna Fedotovna."

"How so?" inquired the guests.

"I cannot understand," continued Tomsy, "how it is that my grandmother does not punt."

"What is there remarkable about an old lady of eighty not punting?"

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