

ANTHOLOGY OF CLASSIC SHORT STORIES

VOL. 9 (SUMMER TALES)

ILLUSTRATED



THE GARDEN PARTY BY KATHERINE MANSFIELD,
THE PIECE OF STRING BY GUY DE MAUPASSANT,
THE ENCHANTED BLUFF BY WILLA CATHER
AND OTHERS

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Katherine Mansfield, The
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In this collection of classic short stories readers will encounter some of the finest writing in world literature:

Byezhin Prairie by Ivan Turgenev

The Enchanted Bluff by Willa Cather

The Garden Party by Katherine Mansfield

A White Heron by Sarah Orne Jewett

The Rocking-Horse Winner by D. H. Lawrence

Gooseberries by Anton Chekhov

How Much Land Does a Man Need? by Leo Tolstoy

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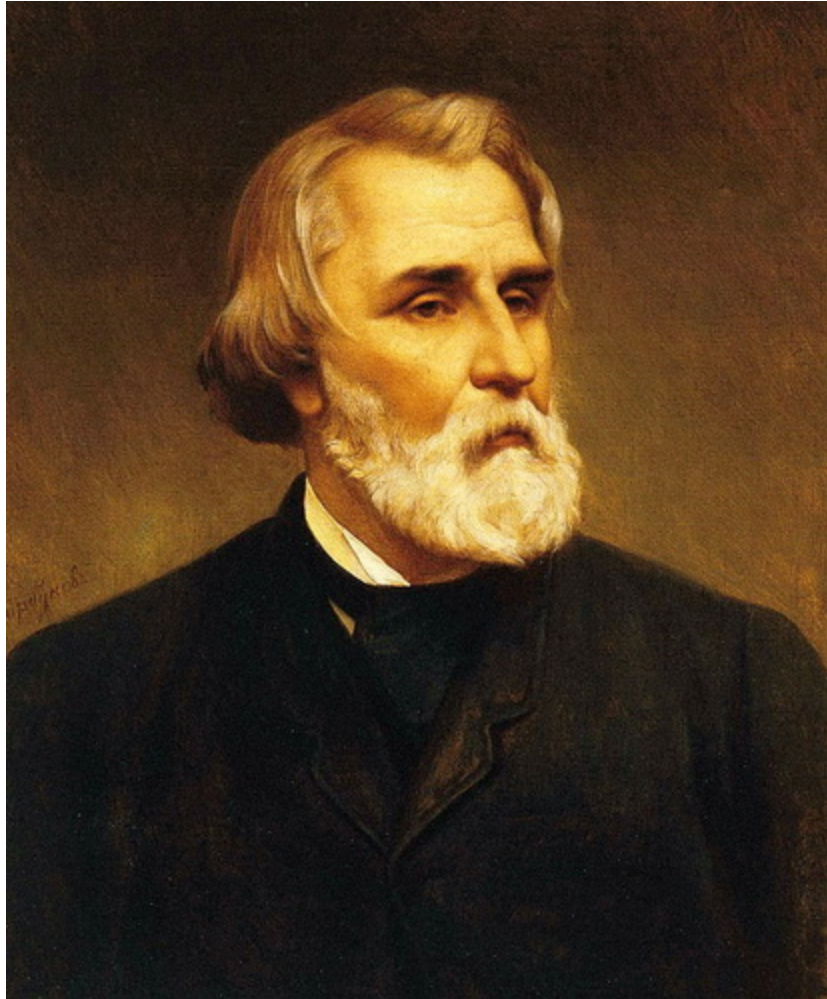
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Byezhin Prairie

By Ivan Turgenev



It was a glorious July day, one of those days which only come after many days of fine weather. From earliest morning the sky is clear; the sunrise does not glow with fire; it is suffused with a soft roseate flush. The sun, not fiery, not red-hot as in time of stifling drought, not dull purple as before a storm, but with a bright and genial radiance, rises

peacefully behind a long and narrow cloud, shines out freshly, and plunges again into its lilac mist. The delicate upper edge of the strip of cloud flashes in little gleaming snakes; their brilliance is like polished silver. But, lo! the dancing rays flash forth again, and in solemn joy, as though flying upward, rises the mighty orb. About mid-day there is wont to be, high up in the sky, a multitude of rounded clouds, golden-grey, with soft white edges. Like islands scattered over an overflowing river, that bathes them in its unbroken reaches of deep transparent blue, they scarcely stir; farther down the heavens they are in movement, packing closer; now there is no blue to be seen between them, but they are themselves almost as blue as the sky, filled full with light and heat. The colour of the horizon, a faint pale lilac, does not change all day, and is the same all round; nowhere is there storm gathering and darkening; only somewhere rays of bluish colour stretch down from the sky; it is a sprinkling of scarce-perceptible rain. In the evening these clouds disappear; the last of them, blackish and undefined as smoke, lie streaked with pink, facing the setting sun; in the place where it has gone down, as calmly as it rose, a crimson glow lingers long over the darkening earth, and, softly flashing like a candle carried carelessly, the evening star flickers in the sky. On such days all the colours are softened, bright but not glaring; everything is suffused with a kind of touching tenderness. On such days the heat is sometimes very great; often it is even "steaming" on the slopes of the fields, but a wind dispels this growing sultriness, and whirling eddies of dust—sure sign of settled, fine weather—move along the roads and across the fields in high white columns. In the pure dry air there is a scent of wormwood, rye in blossom, and buckwheat; even an hour before nightfall there is no moisture in the air. It is for such weather that the farmer longs, for harvesting his wheat...

On just such a day I was once out grouse-shooting in the Tchern district of the province of Tula. I started and shot a fair amount of game; my full game-bag cut my shoulder mercilessly; but already the evening glow had faded, and the cool shades of twilight were beginning to grow thicker, and to spread across the sky, which was still bright, though no longer lighted up by the rays of the setting sun, when I at last decided to turn back homewards. With swift steps I passed through the long "square" of underwoods, clambered up a hill, and instead of the familiar plain I expected to see, with the oakwood on the right and the little white church in the distance, I saw before me a scene completely different, and quite new to me. A narrow valley lay at my feet, and directly facing me a dense wood of aspen-trees rose up like a thick wall. I stood still in perplexity, looked round me... "Aha!" I thought, "I have somehow come wrong; I kept too much to the right," and surprised at my own mistake, I rapidly descended the hill. I was at once plunged into a disagreeable clinging mist, exactly as though I had gone down into a cellar; the thick high grass at the bottom of the valley, all drenched with dew, was white like a smooth tablecloth; one felt afraid somehow to walk on it. I made haste to get on the other side, and walked along beside the aspenwood, bearing to the left. Bats were already hovering over its slumbering tree-tops, mysteriously flitting and quivering across the clear obscure of the sky; a young belated hawk flew in swift, straight course upwards, hastening to its nest. "Here, directly I get to this corner," I thought to myself, "I shall find the road at once; but I have come a mile out of my way!"

I did at last reach the end of the wood, but there was no road of any sort there; some kind of low bushes overgrown with long grass extended far and wide before me; behind them in the far, far distance could be discerned a tract of waste land. I stopped again. "Well? Where am I?" I began ransacking my brain to recall how and where I had been

walking during the day... “Ah! but these are the bushes at Parahin,” I cried at last; “of course! then this must be Sindyev wood. But how did I get here? So far?... Strange! Now I must bear to the right again.”

I went to the right through the bushes. Meantime the night had crept close and grown up like a storm-cloud; it seemed as though, with the mists of evening, darkness was rising up on all sides and flowing down from overhead. I had come upon some sort of little, untrodden, overgrown path; I walked along it, gazing intently before me. Soon all was blackness and silence around—only the quail’s cry was heard from time to time. Some small night-bird, flitting noiselessly near the ground on its soft wings, almost flapped against me and scurried away in alarm. I came out on the further side of the bushes, and made my way along a field by the hedge. By now I could hardly make out distant objects; the field showed dimly white around; beyond it rose up a sullen darkness, which seemed moving up closer in huge masses every instant. My steps gave a muffled sound in the air, that grew colder and colder. The pale sky began again to grow blue—but it was the blue of night. The tiny stars glimmered and twinkled in it.

What I had been taking for a wood turned out to be a dark round hillock. “But where am I, then?” I repeated again aloud, standing still for the third time and looking inquiringly at my spot and tan English dog, Dianka by name, certainly the most intelligent of four-footed creatures. But the most intelligent of four-footed creatures only wagged her tail, blinked her weary eyes dejectedly, and gave me no sensible advice. I felt myself disgraced in her eyes and pushed desperately forward, as though I had suddenly guessed which way I ought to go; I scaled the hill, and found myself in a hollow of no great depth, ploughed round.

A strange sensation came over me at once. This hollow had the form of an almost perfect cauldron, with sloping sides; at the bottom of it were some great white stones

standing upright—it seemed as though they had crept there for some secret council—and it was so still and dark in it, so dreary and weird seemed the sky, overhanging it, that my heart sank. Some little animal was whining feebly and piteously among the stones. I made haste to get out again on to the hillock. Till then I had not quite given up all hope of finding the way home; but at this point I finally decided that I was utterly lost, and without any further attempt to make out the surrounding objects, which were almost completely plunged in darkness, I walked straight forward, by the aid of the stars, at random... For about half-an-hour I walked on in this way, though I could hardly move one leg before the other. It seemed as if I had never been in such a deserted country in my life; nowhere was there the glimmer of a fire, nowhere a sound to be heard. One sloping hillside followed another; fields stretched endlessly upon fields; bushes seemed to spring up out of the earth under my very nose. I kept walking and was just making up my mind to lie down somewhere till morning, when suddenly I found myself on the edge of a horrible precipice.

I quickly drew back my lifted foot, and through the almost opaque darkness I saw far below me a vast plain. A long river skirted it in a semi-circle, turned away from me; its course was marked by the steely reflection of the water still faintly glimmering here and there. The hill on which I found myself terminated abruptly in an almost overhanging precipice, whose gigantic profile stood out black against the dark-blue waste of sky, and directly below me, in the corner formed by this precipice and the plain near the river, which was there a dark, motionless mirror, under the lee of the hill, two fires side by side were smoking and throwing up red flames. People were stirring round them, shadows hovered, and sometimes the front of a little curly head was lighted up by the glow.

I found out at last where I had got to. This plain was well known in our parts under the name of Byezhin Prairie... But

there was no possibility of returning home, especially at night; my legs were sinking under me from weariness. I decided to get down to the fires and to wait for the dawn in the company of these men, whom I took for drovers. I got down successfully, but I had hardly let go of the last branch I had grasped, when suddenly two large shaggy white dogs rushed angrily barking upon me. The sound of ringing boyish voices came from round the fires; two or three boys quickly got up from the ground. I called back in response to their shouts of inquiry. They ran up to me, and at once called off the dogs, who were specially struck by the appearance of my Dianka. I came down to them.

I had been mistaken in taking the figures sitting round the fires for drovers. They were simply peasant boys from a neighbouring village, who were in charge of a drove of horses. In hot summer weather with us they drive the horses out at night to graze in the open country: the flies and gnats would give them no peace in the daytime; they drive out the drove towards evening, and drive them back in the early morning: it's a great treat for the peasant boys. Bare-headed, in old fur-capes, they bestride the most spirited nags, and scurry along with merry cries and hooting and ringing laughter, swinging their arms and legs, and leaping into the air. The fine dust is stirred up in yellow clouds and moves along the road; the tramp of hoofs in unison resounds afar; the horses race along, pricking up their ears; in front of all, with his tail in the air and thistles in his tangled mane, prances some shaggy chestnut, constantly shifting his paces as he goes.

I told the boys I had lost my way, and sat down with them. They asked me where I came from, and then were silent for a little and turned away. Then we talked a little again. I lay down under a bush, whose shoots had been nibbled off, and began to look round. It was a marvellous picture; about the fire a red ring of light quivered and seemed to swoon away in the embrace of a background of

darkness; the flame flaring up from time to time cast swift flashes of light beyond the boundary of this circle; a fine tongue of light licked the dry twigs and died away at once; long thin shadows, in their turn breaking in for an instant, danced right up to the very fires; darkness was struggling with light. Sometimes, when the fire burnt low and the circle of light shrank together, suddenly out of the encroaching darkness a horse's head was thrust in, bay, with striped markings or all white, stared with intent blank eyes upon us, nipped hastily the long grass, and drawing back again, vanished instantly. One could only hear it still munching and snorting. From the circle of light it was hard to make out what was going on in the darkness; everything close at hand seemed shut off by an almost black curtain; but farther away hills and forests were dimly visible in long blurs upon the horizon.

The dark unclouded sky stood, inconceivably immense, triumphant, above us in all its mysterious majesty. One felt a sweet oppression at one's heart, breathing in that peculiar, overpowering, yet fresh fragrance—the fragrance of a summer night in Russia. Scarcely a sound was to be heard around... Only at times, in the river near, the sudden splash of a big fish leaping, and the faint rustle of a reed on the bank, swaying lightly as the ripples reached it... the fires alone kept up a subdued crackling.

The boys sat round them: there too sat the two dogs, who had been so eager to devour me. They could not for long after reconcile themselves to my presence, and, drowsily blinking and staring into the fire, they growled now and then with an unwonted sense of their own dignity; first they growled, and then whined a little, as though deploring the impossibility of carrying out their desires. There were altogether five boys: Fedya, Pavlusha, Ilyusha, Kostya and Vanya. (From their talk I learnt their names, and I intend now to introduce them to the reader.)

The first and eldest of all, Fedya, one would take to be about fourteen. He was a well-made boy, with good-looking, delicate, rather small features, curly fair hair, bright eyes, and a perpetual half-merry, half-careless smile. He belonged, by all appearances, to a well-to-do family, and had ridden out to the prairie, not through necessity, but for amusement. He wore a gay print shirt, with a yellow border; a short new overcoat slung round his neck was almost slipping off his narrow shoulders; a comb hung from his blue belt. His boots, coming a little way up the leg, were certainly his own—not his father's. The second boy, Pavlusha, had tangled black hair, grey eyes, broad cheek-bones, a pale face pitted with small-pox, a large but well-cut mouth; his head altogether was large—"a beer-barrel head," as they say—and his figure was square and clumsy. He was not a good-looking boy—there's no denying it!—and yet I liked him; he looked very sensible and straightforward, and there was a vigorous ring in his voice. He had nothing to boast of in his attire; it consisted simply of a homespun shirt and patched trousers. The face of the third, Ilyusha, was rather uninteresting; it was a long face, with short-sighted eyes and a hook nose; it expressed a kind of dull, fretful uneasiness; his tightly-drawn lips seemed rigid; his contracted brow never relaxed; he seemed continually blinking from the firelight. His flaxen—almost white—hair hung out in thin wisps under his low felt hat, which he kept pulling down with both hands over his ears. He had on new bast-shoes and leggings; a thick string, wound three times round his figure, carefully held together his neat black smock. Neither he nor Pavlusha looked more than twelve years old. The fourth, Kostya, a boy of ten, aroused my curiosity by his thoughtful and sorrowful look. His whole face was small, thin, freckled, pointed at the chin like a squirrel's; his lips were barely perceptible; but his great black eyes, that shone with liquid brilliance, produced a strange impression; they seemed trying to express something for

which the tongue—his tongue, at least—had no words. He was undersized and weakly, and dressed rather poorly. The remaining boy, Vanya, I had not noticed at first; he was lying on the ground, peacefully curled up under a square rug, and only occasionally thrust his curly brown head out from under it: this boy was seven years old at the most.

So I lay under the bush at one side and looked at the boys. A small pot was hanging over one of the fires; in it potatoes were cooking. Pavlusha was looking after them, and on his knees he was trying them by poking a splinter of wood into the boiling water. Fedya was lying leaning on his elbow, and smoothing out the skirts of his coat. Ilyusha was sitting beside Kostya, and still kept blinking constrainedly. Kostya's head drooped despondently, and he looked away into the distance. Vanya did not stir under his rug. I pretended to be asleep. Little by little, the boys began talking again.

At first they gossiped of one thing and another, the work of to-morrow, the horses; but suddenly Fedya turned to Ilyusha, and, as though taking up again an interrupted conversation, asked him:

“Come then, so you've seen the domovoy^[1]?”

“No, I didn't see him, and no one ever can see him,” answered Ilyusha, in a weak hoarse voice, the sound of which was wonderfully in keeping with the expression of his face; “I heard him... Yes, and not I alone.”

“Where does he live—in your place?” asked Pavlusha.

“In the old paper-mill.”

“Why, do you go to the factory?”

“Of course we do. My brother Avdushka and I, we are paper-glazers.”

“I say—factory-hands!”

“Well, how did you hear it, then?” asked Fedya.

“It was like this. It happened that I and my brother Avdushka, with Fyodor of Mihyevska, and Ivashka the

Squint-eyed, and the other Ivashka who comes from the Red Hills, and Ivashka of Suhorukov too—and there were some other boys there as well—there were ten of us boys there altogether—the whole shift, that is—it happened that we spent the night at the paper-mill; that’s to say, it didn’t happen, but Nazarov, the overseer, kept us. ‘Why,’ said he, ‘should you waste time going home, boys; there’s a lot of work to-morrow, so don’t go home, boys.’ So we stopped, and were all lying down together, and Avdushka had just begun to say, ‘I say, boys, suppose the domovoy were to come?’ And before he’d finished saying so, someone suddenly began walking over our heads; we were lying down below, and he began walking upstairs overhead, where the wheel is. We listened: he walked; the boards seemed to be bending under him, they creaked so; then he crossed over, above our heads; all of a sudden the water began to drip and drip over the wheel; the wheel rattled and rattled and again began to turn, though the sluices of the conduit above had been let down. We wondered who could have lifted them up so that the water could run; any way, the wheel turned and turned a little, and then stopped. Then he went to the door overhead and began coming downstairs, and came down like this, not hurrying himself; the stairs seemed to groan under him too... Well, he came right down to our door, and waited and waited... and all of a sudden the door simply flew open. We were in a fright; we looked—there was nothing... Suddenly what if the net on one of the vats didn’t begin moving; it got up, and went rising and ducking and moving in the air as though someone were stirring with it, and then it was in its place again. Then, at another vat, a hook came off its nail, and then was on its nail again; and then it seemed as if someone came to the door, and suddenly coughed and choked like a sheep, but so loudly!... We all fell down in a heap and huddled against one another... Just weren’t we in a fright that night!”

“I say!” murmured Pavel, “what did he cough for?”

“I don’t know; perhaps it was the damp.”

All were silent for a little.

“Well,” inquired Fedya, “are the potatoes done?”

Pavlusha tried them.

“No, they are raw... My, what a splash!” he added, turning his face in the direction of the river; “that must be a pike... And there’s a star falling.”

“I say, I can tell you something, brothers,” began Kostya, in a shrill little voice; “listen what my dad told me the other day.”

“Well, we are listening,” said Fedya with a patronising air.

“You know Gavril, I suppose, the carpenter up in the big village?”

“Yes, we know him.”

“And do you know why he is so sorrowful always, never speaks? do you know? I’ll tell you why he’s so sorrowful; he went one day, daddy said, he went, brothers, into the forest nutting. So he went nutting into the forest and lost his way; he went on—God only can tell where he got to. So he went on and on, brothers—but ‘twas no good!—he could not find the way; and so night came on out of doors. So he sat down under a tree. ‘I’ll wait till morning,’ thought he. He sat down and began to drop asleep. So as he was falling asleep, suddenly he heard someone call him. He looked up; there was no one. He fell asleep again; again he was called. He looked and looked again; and in front of him there sat a russalka^[2] on a branch, swinging herself and calling him to her, and simply dying with laughing; she laughed so... And the moon was shining bright, so bright, the moon shone so clear—everything could be seen plain, brothers. So she called him, and she herself was as bright and as white sitting on the branch as some dace or a roach, or like some little carp so white and silvery... Gavril the carpenter almost fainted, brothers, but she laughed without stopping, and kept beckoning him to her like this. Then Gavril was

just getting up; he was just going to yield to the russalka, brothers, but—the Lord put it into his heart, doubtless—he crossed himself like this... And it was so hard for him to make that cross, brothers; he said, ‘My hand was simply like a stone; it would not move.’... Ugh! the horrid witch... So when he made the cross, brothers, the russalka, she left off laughing, and all at once how she did cry... She cried, brothers, and wiped her eyes with her hair, and her hair was green as any hemp. So Gavrila looked and looked at her, and at last he fell to questioning her. ‘Why are you weeping, wild thing of the woods?’ And the russalka began to speak to him like this: ‘If you had not crossed yourself, man,’ she says, ‘you should have lived with me in gladness of heart to the end of your days; and I weep, I am grieved at heart because you crossed yourself; but I will not grieve alone; you too shall grieve at heart to the end of your days.’ Then she vanished, brothers, and at once it was plain to Gavrila how to get out of the forest... Only since then he goes always sorrowful, as you see.”

“Ugh!” said Fedya after a brief silence; “but how can such an evil thing of the woods ruin a Christian soul—he did not listen to her?”

“And I say!” said Kostya. “Gavrila said that her voice was as shrill and plaintive as a toad’s.”

“Did your father tell you that himself?” Fedya went on.

“Yes. I was lying in the loft; I heard it all.”

“It’s a strange thing. Why should he be sorrowful?... But I suppose she liked him, since she called him.”

“Ay, she liked him!” put in Ilyusha. “Yes, indeed! she wanted to tickle him to death, that’s what she wanted. That’s what they do, those russalkas.”

“There ought to be russalkas here too, I suppose,” observed Fedya.

“No,” answered Kostya, “this is a holy open place. There’s one thing, though: the river’s near.”