

## The Tales of Belkin

*A. Pushkin*

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Those consists of five short independent stories, thinly disguised as the work of a fictional character. Together they give a sense of provincial Russia at the end of the 18th century. Large distances, huge forests, inclement weather, and few scattered people lost in the immensity of the vast countryside. There are oases of high culture, manors in which idle aristocrats dwell, leading lives of reckless luxury amidst the squalor of serfs. Two of the stories are rather weak. I am thinking of 'The Shot' and 'The Undertaker'. 'The Shot' tells the story of the obsessive duelist, in so doing extolling the virtues of the barbaric customs, eventually to claim the life of Pushkin himself, along with other promising men about town with more than a flair for writing. While 'The Undertaker' is a kind of ghost story. Both may work through oral communication provided the right setting is present, as they are well told, with definite suspense, only that the suspense finds no ultimate outlet but is felt as anti-climactic.

'The Snowstorm' on the other hand has at least a point. The elaborate plans of a clandestine rendez-vous with the purpose of a secret wedding, are overturned by the sudden appearance of a blizzard, that prevents the groom from arriving at the nearby church in time, and accidentally makes the bride being married to the wrong man. Many years later, the unfortunate bridegroom already long since dead in war, the two accidentally married meet once again, also by accident and fall in love, but their eventual marriage being prevented by them both being previously married. This was clearly a time when such things were taken seriously indeed (if not by the author himself). A clever twist of a plot left unresolved for the pleasure of the reader to resolve.

A more elaborate version on roughly the same theme is given by 'Mistress into Maid'. The son and daughter of two warring fathers and neighbors meet and fall in love. The twist being that the daughter uses some degree of duplicity and dresses up as a maid, lest it would appear that her initial curiosity to glimpse the handsome lad could be construed as she being in pursuit of him. There are some complications due to the fact that the two warring neighbors make peace with each other and become friends, they accidentally having come in contact with each other outside the usual rituals of social intercourse. The pretended maid manages to hide her true identity during a reconciliation dinner by making herself up heavily, in apparent mockery of her English governess, a prank greatly appreciated by her father. As the friendship deepens, the two fathers decide that their respective off-springs should marry, whether they want it or not. The son is dead-set against it, his heart is lost to the maid. He goes uninvited to the neighbor, finds his beloved, and proposes to marry her, much to the delight of her father, who sees everything going according to plan. Once again the story breaks off, the reader invited to supply the continuation, which he or she is delighted to do of course, what could be sweeter than imagining different scenarios with such eminently romantic and satisfying outcomes. Why not have the maid turn down his offer, with the father eventually managing to force him into marrying advantageously the

neighbor's daughter, who will of course be similarly disguised at the ceremony, and only reveal her true identity during the wedding night.

However, the most touching story, and one which could have been turned into a masterpiece by a Chechov, not to say that he would turn his nose up at the hilarious farcicality of the others, is the one called 'The Postmaster'. It is like a fairy-tale and can be related briefly. The narrator, an inveterate traveller, meets once a Postmaster who has a young exceedingly beautiful daughter. One day she is abducted by a rich Hussar (incidentally the act unwittingly encouraged by the father who naively thinks that she is just given a ride to the nearby church and makes light of her initial reluctance) and disappears. The distraught father takes a leave of absence, travels to St-Petersburg and finds the Hussar, who tries to pay him off, but the postmaster persists, find him at his home with a young lady, very well-dressed, but is forcibly turned out by the soldier. He is inconsolable. The smartly dressed woman, who must be his lost daughter is no doubt enjoying a brief session in luxury before being cast away as a used woman. Some years later he dies, and some time after a wealthy woman with children arrives at his grave. Of course the way to tell the story, constitutes more than half of the pleasure of a story, but even the brief outline above conveys the bathos. It is a story that is touching rather than amusing, and somehow seems to relay a real event, rather than a caricature of the same. In short a story that points forward to Russian realism to flourish later in the century.

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