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The Tales of Belkin

Alexander Pushkin · *1831 · T. Keane translation (1894)*

Pushkin wrote five short stories in the autumn of 1830 and published them in 1831 as the work of a fictitious late country gentleman, Ivan Petrovich Belkin, who had heard them from others. They are small in scale and perfect in construction, and they are the beginning of Russian prose fiction in its modern form. Each story is a short plot turning on a chance, a mistake, or a change of fortune.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

How do small chances, mistakes, and pride shape a life, and how can a plain story hold them?

A duelist keeps his shot in reserve for years. Two young lovers are parted by a storm and meet again when it is too late. A coffin-maker dreams of his dead customers. A postmaster loses his daughter to a hussar and dies of grief. A gentleman's daughter dresses as a peasant to win a rival's son. The tales are comic, serious, and eerie by turns, and each has a clear twist.

KEY CHARACTERS

Silvio
A duelist who waits for his revenge.

Maria Gavrilovna
The heroine of The Snowstorm.

Bourmin
A wounded officer.

Adrian Prokhoroff
The coffin-maker.

Simeon Virin
The postmaster.

Dounia
The postmaster's daughter.

Liza Mouromsky
The amateur peasant girl.

Grades 9–12
Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01
The Shot
TALE 1

Silvio, a retired officer who lives for pistol practice, tells the narrator of a duel he has kept in reserve for years. He keeps his promise at last, in the house of a young count who has married.

- Silvio's long wait for revenge is the plot.
- The Count's calm is the test.
- The ending reveals what became of Silvio.

02
The Snowstorm
TALE 2

Maria Gavrilovna and Vladimir plan to elope, but a storm separates them. Years later she meets an officer, Bourmin, who is the other man in the church.

- The storm is a chance event.
- A mistaken wedding binds two strangers.
- The truth comes out years later.

03
The Coffin-Maker
TALE 3

Adrian Prokhoroff, after a drunken party, dreams that the dead whom he has buried come to his house. He wakes to find that it was a dream.

- The party is a comic scene.
- The dream is eerie and funny.
- The waking shows it was only a dream.

04
The Postmaster
TALE 4

Simeon Virin, a postmaster, loses his daughter Dounia to a hussar. He goes to look for her in St. Petersburg, is thrown out, and dies, and she later visits his grave.

- The postmaster is a humble figure.
- His search in the city ends in rejection.
- Dounia's visit to his grave is the last scene.

05
An Amateur Peasant Girl
TALE 5

Liza, daughter of a squire, disguises herself as a peasant to meet Alexei, the son of her father's rival. The two fall in love, and the parents are reconciled.

- The disguise is a comic device.
- Two feuding families are brought together.
- The tale ends in a happy match.

Chance | Pride and Revenge | Love | Humble Lives

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 9–12

1. Belkin is a fictional author. Ask why Pushkin used him.
2. Each tale turns on a twist. Look for it.
3. The Postmaster should be read alongside the other tales. Ask how it is different.
4. The stories are short and plain. Notice what Pushkin leaves out.

Summaries are original to Classics Library. Read the T. Keane translation (1894) (Project Gutenberg #55219), the public-domain text hosted at classicslaunch.org/works/pushkin-tales-of-belkin/.