

**A SLAY SOUL, AND  
OTHER STORIES**

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A Slav soul, and other stories by Alexander Kuprin

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**ALEXANDER KUPRIN**

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OTHER STORIES**



A SLAV SOUL  
AND OTHER STORIES

BY  
ALEXANDER KUPRIN

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY  
STEPHEN GRAHAM

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## INTRODUCTION

ALEXANDER KUPRIN

"OH how incomprehensible for us, how mysterious, how strange are the very simplest happenings in life. And we, not understanding them, unable to penetrate their significance, heap one event upon another, plait them together, join them, make acquaintances and marriages, write books, say sermons, found ministries, carry on war or trade, make new inventions and then after all, create history ! And yet every time I think of the immensity and complexity, the incomprehensible and elemental accidentoriness of the whole hurly-burly of life, then my own little life seems but a miserable speck of dust lost in the whirl of a hurricane."

So in a paragraph in one of his sketches Alexander Kuprin gives his feelings about his life and his work, and in that expression perhaps we see his characteristic attitude towards the world of which he writes. One of the strongest tales in this collection, 'Tempting Providence,' is very representative of Kuprin in this vein.

After Chekhof the most popular tale-writer in Russia is Kuprin, the author of fourteen volumes of effusive, touching and humorous stories. He is read by the great mass of the Russian reading public, and his works can be bought at any railway bookstall in



the Empire. He is devoured by the students, loved by the bourgeois, and admired even by intellectual and fastidious Russians. It is impossible not to admire this natural torrent of Russian thoughts and words and sentiments. His lively pages are a reflection of Russia herself, and without having been once in the country it would be possible to get a fair notion of its surface life by reading these tales in translation. Perhaps the greatest of living Russian novelists is Kuprin—exalted, hysterical, sentimental, Rabelaisian Kuprin. He comes to you with a handful of wild flowers in one red, hairy hand and a shovelful of rubbish in the other—his shiny, lachrymose but unfathomable features pouring floods of tears or rolling and bursting in guffaws of laughter. His is a rank verbiage—he gives birth to words, ideas, examples in tens where other writers go by units and threes.

He is occasionally coarse, occasionally sentimental, but he gives great delight to his readers; his are rough-hewn lumps of conversation and life. With him everything is taken from life. He seems to be a master of detail, and the characteristic of his style is a tendency to give the most diverting lists. Often paragraph after paragraph, if you look into the style, would be found to be lists of delicious details reported in a conversational manner. Thus, opening a volume at random, you can easily find an example :—

“Imagine the village we had reached—all overblown with snow; the inevitable village idiot, Serozha, walking almost naked in the snow; the priest, who won't play cards the day before a festival but writes denunciations to the village starosta instead—a stupid, artful man, and an adept at getting alms, speaking an atrocious Petersburg Russian. If you have grasped what society was like in the village you know to what point of boredom and stupefaction we attained.

We had already got tired of bear-hunting, hare-hunting with hounds, pistol-shooting at a target through three rooms, writing humorous verses. It must be confessed we quarrelled."

He is also the inventor of amusing sentences which can almost be used as proverbs :—

He knew which end of the asparagus to eat.

Or,

We looked at our neighbours through a microscope; they at us through a telescope.

Every one of Kuprin's stories has the necessary Attic salt. He is like our English Kipling, whom he greatly admires, and about whom he has written in one of his books an appreciative essay. He is also something like the American O. Henry, especially in the matter of his lists of details and his apt metaphors, but he has not the artifice nor the everlasting American smile. Kuprin, moreover, takes his matter from life and writes with great ease and carelessness; O. Henry put together from life and re-wrote twelve times.

Above all things Kuprin is a sentimental author, preferring an impulse to a reason, and abandoning logic whenever his feelings are touched. He likes to feel the reader with the tears in his eyes and then to go forward with him in the unity of emotional friendship. There is, however, under this excitement a rather self-centred cynic despising the things he does not love, a satirical genius. His humour is nearly always at the expense of some person, institution or class of society. Thus "The Song and the Dance" is at the expense of the peasantry, "The Last Word" at the expense of the lower *intelligentia*, "The White Poodle" at the expense of those rich bourgeois who have villas on the Crimean shores, "Anathema" at

the expense of the Church, "Mechanical Justice" at the expense of the professor, and so on. And it is part of Kuprin's sentiment to love dogs almost as much as men, and he tells no tales at dogs' expense. "The White Poodle" and "Dogs' Happiness" are two of his dog tales.

The tales selected are taken from various volumes, and two of them, "The Elephant" and "The White Poodle," from a volume specially designed by him for reading aloud to children. They are in very simple and colloquial and humorous Russian, and are delightful to read aloud.

Kuprin, who is a living Russian tale-writer, though considerably less productive than in his earlier years, spent a great deal of time in the Crimea, which is evidently favourite country to him. Chekhov also lived in the Crimea and tended lovingly his rose garden at Yalta. His neighbour, Kuprin, wrote one of the most charming reminiscent essays on Chekhov and his life in "To the Glory of the Living and the Dead," which also contains the Kipling essay. Many of Kuprin's stories relate to the Crimea, and the longest of these given in this selection contains a description of Crimean life, and gives (pp. 154—157) a wonderful impression of a Crimean summer night. Kuprin has also lived in England and has written tales of London life, and has occasional references to English characteristics. But I have avoided carrying coals to Newcastle.

As compared with Sologub, whose volume of beautiful tales, "The Sweet-scented Name," has found so many friends in England, Kuprin may be said to be nearer to the earth, less in the clouds.