ANTON CHEKHOV'S SHORT STORIES

SELECTED AND EDITED BY
RALPH E. MATLAW

A NORTON CRITICAL EDITION

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TEXTS OF THE STORIES
BACKGROUNDS
CRITICISM

Selected and Edited by

RALPH E. MATLAW
LATE OF
THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

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Preface

A professor's view: "It's the commentaries on Shakespeare that matter, not Shakespeare."

—from Chekhov's *Notebooks*

A selection of Chekhov's stories is also a critical judgment, an evaluation, and therefore a distortion. It is difficult today to appreciate Chekhov's technical innovations in the shorter forms of fiction, since they have become standard practice. Yet technique and length concerned Chekhov deeply from the very beginning of his career, when he was limited to one hundred lines per story, and may be used as one of the bases of choice. This edition is restricted to the short stories, eliminating such masterpieces of the longer story or short novel as *The Steppe*, *A Dreary Story*, *Ward No. 6*, *Three Years*, *My Life*, and *In the Ravine*, which at the moment are conveniently available in other collections. Stories of an intermediate length, like *The Nameday Party* or *The Murder*, were also omitted, not as any particular entity of narrative fiction but in order to accommodate more of Chekhov's stories. The stories chosen from the hundreds that remain present a variegated yet inadequate or incomplete spectacle of human behavior and thought depicted by Chekhov. Several large topics are missing: among the earlier stories, many of Chekhov's humorous pieces devoted to human foibles in general and to the theater in particular; in the middle phase, stories concerned more immediately with reactions to contemporary problems and ideas, to a quest for meaning, as in *A Nervous Breakdown*, *The Bet*, *Gusev*, *An Anonymous Story*; in the late period, those dealing with the rise of huge factories and the change in the rural population that create so grim a social picture when grouped together (*A Woman's Kingdom*, *At Home* [1897], *The New Villa*); and throughout his career, stories revolving around sex: *A Misfortune*, *Slime*, *Ariadne*, and many others. Yet the general picture of Chekhov's work that emerges from this selection reflects his major concerns, techniques, and attitudes, and includes most of his best and most popular stories. Some things have necessarily been left out even among the late stories (*Ionych*, *At Christmas Time*), as less rewarding than others (*The Lady with the Dog*, my favorite among Chekhov's stories, and *The Student*, his own); the earlier stories again reflect within the broader categories some personal preferences, to the point of my having translated two stories (*A Living Chronology* and *The Siren's Song*) that did not seem to convey

quite the right tone in existing translations. A good case could be made out for a different choice, and I hope the reader will be provoked into making it after reading all those stories translated into English that could not be included here.

Chekhov the man and Chekhov's art have given rise to many contradictory legends. The first is presented briefly through Gorky's memoirs of Chekhov during the last years of his life. Although that picture omits many details, moods, attitudes, and phases of Chekhov's life, it captures much of the essence of the man. The second has been by and large ignored. There are famous essays on Chekhov as a pessimist, the portrayer of gloom and hopelessness, futility, "the voice of twilight Russia," of isolation, the process of vulgarization, and the constant failure of communication among people, just as there are essays on the hopeful Chekhov foreseeing a new era and a glorious future. There are good and valid historical reasons for such views, but these essays do little to advance our understanding of Chekhov's work. Chekhov was not given to generalities like these, but rather insisted on honesty and truth, on depicting what existed rather than what one hoped to see because one saw in automatic, ordinary, and unthinking ways. The selection from his letters amply demonstrates this, and a fuller selection would have documented and elaborated attitudes that may be gleamed in his work. Yet like all art the work is far richer than the attitudes and circumstances that provided the impulse to create it. The attempt to draw a message or moral or lesson from Chekhov's stories always turns out unsatisfactory and simplistic. Pasternak's Dr. Zhivago says of Chekhov's (deceptive) simplicity that it has a "modest reticence in such high-sounding matters as the ultimate purpose of mankind or its salvation. It's not that [he] didn't think of such matters, and to good effect, but to talk about such things seemed to [him] pretentious, presumptuous." The picture is there, fully; what it means, what can be done about it, and whether anything should be done about it, and at what cost, is something else again. The essays chosen, therefore, tend to emphasize the methods and scope of the stories, rather than some normative conclusion, and to present the humorist and satirist as well as the depictor of "more serious" existence. I have purposely omitted expatiations on *poshlost'* (the banal, trivial, specious, vulgar) that Chekhov depicted so masterfully, as on recurrent motives like obesity, slovenliness, concern for food, and the like as an indicator of such *poshlost'*, because they merely label (whether correctly or not) and thereby seem to obviate the necessity for considering the passages themselves. I have also found it difficult to use much of the material that studies Chekhov's dialogue, descriptions, and narrators, and their relationship to Chekhov's predecessors and the Russian tradi-

tion, since the subtleties of Chekhov's style are lost in translation. Moreover, much of this material is devoted to the longer works or to stories not reprinted here, and relies greatly on extensive quotations. It is a minor revelation to find out that a large portion of the extensive critical literature on Chekhov seems to be irrelevant once specific stories have been selected. There are, of course, innumerable articles dealing with one phase or another of particular stories: Chekhov himself has an interesting notation in his *Notebooks*: " 'Dmitri the Pretender and Actors,' 'Turgenev and Tigers'—it is possible to write such articles and people do write them." No such essays have been included.

D. S. Mirsky's essay, characteristically opinionated, incisive, and lively, still serves as an excellent introduction to Chekhov, although some of its "correctives" to opinion prevalent in the 1920's no longer seem necessary. Renato Poggioli's consideration of the early work indicate Chekhov's range and originality, while his treatment of the *The Darling* may serve (in conjunction with Karl Kramer's view), among other things, as an indicator of the multiplicity of interpretations possible for a single story. There are remarks on form by A. Derman, on the technique of a particular story (*Sleepy*) by Gleb Struve, on the relationship between biography and a story in a view of *The Lady with a Dog* by Virginia Llewellyn Smith, and, in a very different and more suggestive sense, in *The Bishop*. Many technical considerations, critical insights, and interpretations abound in these and the other essays, which have been arranged to follow the chronological order of the stories.

The translations, with the exception of *A Living Chronology* and *The Siren's Song*, were made by three women during different parts of this century: Ivy Litvinov, Marian Fell, and Constance Garnett. Chekhov may be easier to translate than other Russian writers, as Mirsky suggests, but the difference in quality from the original nevertheless is very marked. The translations have been revised, wherever necessary, in accordance with contemporary usage; where I have noticed mistakes I have corrected them without further ado. There is a minimum of explanatory footnotes. The stories do not need a more elaborate apparatus to convey their meaning, and a more refined reading cannot in any case depend upon a translation.

RALPH E. MATLAW

Chameleon

Police Inspector Ochumelov[1] crossed the marketplace in a new greatcoat holding a bundle in his hand. After him strode a red-haired constable carrying a sieve filled to the brim with confiscated gooseberries. All around was silence.... There was not a soul in the marketplace.... The open doors of small shops and taverns gaped drearily out at God's world, like so many hungry jaws. There were not even any beggars standing near them.

All of a sudden the sound of a voice came to Ochumelov's ears. "So you'd bite, would you, you cur! Don't let it go, lads! Biting is not allowed nowadays. Hold it! Ow!"

A dog's whine was heard. Ochumelov glanced in the direction of the sound and this is what he saw: a dog came running out of the timberyard of the merchant Pichugin on three legs, pursued by a man in a starched print shirt and an unbuttoned waistcoat, his whole body bent forward; the man stumbled and caught hold of the dog by one of its hind legs. There was another whine, and again a shout of: "Don't let it go!" Drowsy faces were thrust out of shops, and in no time a crowd which seemed to have sprung out of the earth had gathered around the timberyard.

"Looks like a public disturbance, Your Honor!" said the constable.

Ochumelov turned, and marched up to the crowd. Right in front of the gate of the yard he saw the above-mentioned individual in the unbuttoned waistcoat, who stood there with his right hand raised, displaying a bleeding finger to the crowd. The words: "I'll give it to you, you devil!" seemed to be written on his tipsy countenance, and the finger itself looked like a banner of victory. Ochumelov recognized in this individual Khryukin,[2] the goldsmith. In the very middle of the crowd, its forelegs well apart, sat the culprit, its whole body a-tremble—a white borzoi pup, with a pointed nose and a yellow spot on its back. In its tearful eyes was an expression of misery and horror.

"What's all this about?" asked Ochumelov, shouldering his way through the crowd. "What are you doing here? Why are you holding up your finger? Who shouted?"

"I was walking along, Your Honor, as quiet as a lamb," began Khryukin, coughing into his fist. "I had business about some wood with Mitri Mitrich here, and suddenly, for no reason whatever, that

1. From the word *ochumely*, "crazed." 2. *Khryu-khryu*—pig's grunt. [*Translator.*] [*Translator.*]

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nuisance bit my finger. Excuse me, but I'm a working man. . . . Mine is a very intricate trade. Make them pay me compensation—perhaps I won't be able to move this finger for a week. It doesn't say in the law, Your Honor, that we have to put up with ferocious animals. If everyone's to start biting, life won't be worth living. . . "

"H'm . . . well, well," said Ochumelov severely, coughing and twitching his eyebrows. "Well, well . . . whose dog is it? I shan't leave it at this. I'll teach people to let dogs run about! It's time something was done about gentlemen who are not willing to obey the regulations! He'll get such a fine, the scoundrel—I'll teach him what it means to let dogs and cattle of all sorts rove about! I'll show him what's what! Eldirin," he continued, turning to the constable, "find out whose dog it is, and draw up a statement. And the dog must be exterminated without delay. It's probably mad . . . whose dog is it, I ask?"

"I thing it belongs to General Zhigalov," said a voice from the crowd.

"General Zhigalov! H'm. Help me off with my coat, Eldirin. . . . Phew, how hot it is! It must be going to rain." He turned to Khryukin: "One thing I don't understand—how did it happen to bite you? How could it have got at your finger? Such a little dog, and you such a strapping fellow! You must have scratched your finger with a nail, and then taken it into your head to get paid for it. I know you fellows! A set of devils!"

"He burned the end of its nose with a lighted cigarette for a joke, Your Honor, and it snapped at him, it's nobody's fool! That Khryukin's always up to some mischief, Your Honor!"

"None of your lies, Squinty! You didn't see me do it, so why lie? His Honor is a wise gentleman, he knows who's lying and who's telling a God's truth. May the justice of the peace try me if I'm lying! It says in the law . . . all men are equal now. I have a brother in the police myself, if you want to know. . . ."

"Don't argue!"

"No, that isn't the General's dog," remarked the constable profoundly. "The General hasn't got a dog like that. All his dogs are pointers."

"Are you sure?"

"Quite sure, Your Honor."

"And you're right! The General's dogs are expensive, breed-dogs, and this one—just look at it! Ugly, mangy cur! Why should anyone keep a dog like that? Are you crazy? If a dog like that were to find itself in Moscow or Petersburg, d'you know what would happen to it? Nobody would worry about the law, it would be got rid of in a minute. You're a victim, Khryukin, and mind you don't leave it at that. He must be taught a lesson! It's high time. . . ."

"Perhaps it is the General's after all," said the constable, thinking aloud. "You can't tell by looking at it. I saw one just like it in his

yard the other day."

"Of course it's the General's!" came the voice from the crowd.

"H'm! Help me on with my coat, Eldirin.... I felt a gust of wind. I'm shivery. Take it to the General's and ask them. Say I found it, and sent it. And tell them not to let it into the street. Perhaps it's an expensive dog, and it'll soon get spoiled if every brute thinks he can stick cigarettes into its nose. A dog's a delicate creature. And you put down your hand, blockhead! Stop showing everyone your silly finger. It's your own fault...."

"Here comes the General's chef, we'll ask him.... Hi, there, Prokhor! Come here, old man! Have a look at this dog . . . is it yours?"

"What next! We've never had one like that in our lives!"

"No need to make any more inquiries," said Ochumelov. "It's a stray. What's the good of standing here talking. You've been told it's a stray, so a stray it is. Destroy it and have done with the matter."

"It isn't ours," continued Prokhor. "It belongs to the General's brother, who came a short time ago. Our General takes no interest in borzois. His brother now, he likes . . ."

"What, has the General's brother come? Vladimir Ivanich?" exclaimed Ochumelov, an ecstatic smile spreading over his features. "Fancy that! And I didn't know. Come to stay?"

"That's right."

"Just fancy! Wanted to see his brother! And I didn't know. So it's *his* dog? Very glad! Take it . . . it's a nice little doggie! Snap at his finger! Ha-ha-ha! Come now, don't tremble! Gr-gr . . . the little rascal's angry.... What a pup!"

Prokhor called the dog and walked out of the timberyard with it. The crowd laughed at Khryukin.

"I'll have you yet!" Ochumelov threatened him, and, wrapping his greatcoat around him, he continued his way across the marketplace.

1884

Oysters

I need no great effort of memory to recall, in every detail, the rainy autumn evening when I stood with my father in one of the more frequented streets of Moscow, and felt that I was gradually being overcome by a strange illness. I had no pain at all, but my legs were giving way under me, the words stuck in my throat, my head slipped weakly on one side.... It seemed as though, in a moment, I must fall down and lose consciousness.

If I had been taken into a hospital at that minute, the doctors

would have had to write over my bed *Fames*,[1] a disease which is not in the manuals of medicine.

Beside me on the pavement stood my father in a shabby summer overcoat and a serge cap, from which a bit of white wadding was sticking out. On his feet he had big heavy galoshes. Afraid, vain man, that people would see that his feet were bare under his galoshes, he had drawn the tops of some old boots up round the calves of his legs.

This poor, foolish, queer creature, whom I loved the more warmly the more ragged and dirty his smart summer overcoat became, had come to Moscow, five months before, to look for a job as copying-clerk. For those five months he had been trudging about Moscow looking for work, and it was only on that day that he had brought himself to go into the street to beg for alms.

Before us was a big house of three stories, adorned with a blue signboard with the word "Restaurant" on it. My head was drooping feebly backwards and to one side, and I could not help looking upwards at the lighted windows of the restaurant. Human figures were flitting about at the windows. I could see the right side of the orchestrion, two oleographs, hanging lamps. . . . Staring into one window, I saw a patch of white. The patch was motionless, and its rectangular outlines stood out sharply against the dark, brown background. I looked intently and made out of the patch a white placard on the wall. Something was written on it, but what it was, I could not see. . . .

For half an hour I kept my eyes on the placard. Its white attracted my eyes, and, as it were, hypnotized my brain. I tried to read it, but my efforts were in vain.

At last the strange disease got the upper hand.

The rumble of the carriages began to seem like thunder, in the stench of the street I distinguished a thousand smells. The restaurant lights and the lamps dazzled my eyes like lightning. My five senses were overstrained and sensitive beyond the normal. I began to see what I had not seen before.

"Oysters . . ." I made out on the placard.

A strange word! I had lived in the world eight years and three months, but had never come across that word. What did it mean? Surely it was not the name of the restaurant-keeper? But signboards with names on them always hang outside, not on the walls indoors!

"Papa, what does 'oysters' mean?" I asked in a husky voice, making an effort to turn my face towards my father.

My father did not hear. He was keeping a watch on the movements of the crowd, and following every passer-by with his eyes. . . . From his eyes I saw that he wanted to say something to the passers-by, but the fatal word hung like a heavy weight on his trembling lips

1. "Hunger," in Latin.

and could not be flung off. He even took a step after one passer-by and touched him on the sleeve, but when he turned round, he said, "I beg your pardon," was overcome with confusion, and staggered back.

"Papa, what dose 'oysters' mean?" I repeated.

"It is an animal . . . that lives in the sea. . . ."

I instantly pictured to myself this unknown marine animal. . . . I thought it must be something midway between a fish and a crab. As it was from the sea they made of it, of course, a very nice hot fish soup with savory pepper and laurel leaves, or broth with vinegar and fricassee of fish and cabbage, or crayfish sauce, or served it cold with horse-radish. . . . I vividly imagined it being brought from the market, quickly cleaned, quickly put in the pot, quickly, quickly, for everyone was hungry . . . awfully hungry! From the kitchen rose the smell of hot fish and crayfish soup.

I felt that this smell was tickling my palate and nostrils, that it was gradually taking possession of my whole body. . . . The restaurant, my father, the white placard, my sleeves were all smelling of it, smelling so strongly that I began to chew. I moved my jaws and swallowed as though I really had a piece of this marine animal in my mouth. . . .

My legs gave way from the blissful sensation I was feeling, and I clutched at my father's arm to keep myself from falling, and leant against his wet summer overcoat. My father was trembling and shivering. He was cold. . . .

"Papa, are oysters a Lenten dish?" I asked.

"They are eaten alive . . ." said my father. "They are in shells like tortoises, but . . . in two halves."

The delicious smell instantly stopped affecting me, and the illusion vanished. . . . Now I understood it all!

"How nasty," I whispered, "how nasty!"

So that's what "oysters" meant! I imagined to myself a creature like a frog. A frog sitting in a shell, peeping out from it with big, glittering eyes, and moving its revolting jaws. I imagined this creature in a shell with claws, glittering eyes, and a slimy skin, being brought from the market. . . . The children would all hide while the cook, frowning with an air of disgust, would take the creature by its claw, put it on a plate, and carry it into the dining-room. The grown-ups would take it and eat it, eat it alive with its eyes, its teeth, its legs! While it squeaked and tried to bite their lips. . . .

I frowned, but . . . but why did my teeth move as though I were munching? The creature was loathsome, disgusting, terrible, but I ate it, ate it greedily, afraid of distinguishing its taste or smell. As soon as I had eaten one, I saw the glittering eyes of a second, a third. . . . I ate them too. . . . At last I ate the table-napkin, the plate, my father's galoshes, the white placard. . . . I ate everything

that caught my eye, because I felt that nothing but eating would take away my illness. The oysters had a terrible look in their eyes and were loathsome. I shuddered at the thought of them, but I wanted to eat! To eat!

"Oysters! Give me some oysters!" was the cry that broke from me and I stretched out my hand.

"Help us, gentlemen!" I heard at that moment my father said, in a hollow and shaking voice. "I am ashamed to ask but—my God!—I can bear no more!"

"Oysters!" I cried, pulling my father by the skirts of his coat.

"Do you mean to say you eat oysters? A little chap like you!" I heard laughter close to me.

Two gentlemen in top hats were standing before us, looking into my face and laughing.

"Do you really eat oysters, youngster? That's interesting! How do you eat them?"

I remember that a strong hand dragged me into the lighted restaurant. A minute later there was a crowd round me, watching me with curiosity and amusement. I sat at a table and ate something slimy, salt with a flavor of dampness and moldiness. I ate greedily without chewing, without looking and trying to discover what I was eating. I fancied that if I opened my eyes I should see glittering eyes, claws, and sharp teeth.

All at once I began biting something hard, there was a sound of a scrunching.

"Ha, ha! He is eating the shells," laughed the crowd. "Little silly, do you suppose you can eat that?"

After that I remember a terrible thirst. I was lying in my bed, and could not sleep for heartburn and the strange taste in my parched mouth. My father was walking up and down, gesticulating with his hands.

"I believe I have caught cold," he was muttering. "I've a feeling in my head as though someone were sitting on it. . . . Perhaps it is because I have not . . . er . . . eaten anything to-day. . . . I really am a queer, stupid creature. . . . I saw those gentlemen pay ten rubles[1] for the oysters. Why didn't I go up to them and ask them . . . to lend me something? They would have given something."

Towards morning, I fell asleep and dreamt of a frog sitting in a shell, moving its eyes. At midday I was awakened by thirst, and looked for my father: he was still walking up and down and gesticulating.

1884

1. In the 1880's a ruble (one hundred kopeks) was worth about fifty cents, but its purchasing power was much greater: for two rubles one could have a decent dinner.

A Living Chronology

Councilor-of-State Sharamykin's living room is bathed in pleasant semi-darkness. A large bronze lamp with a green shade casts a green light *à la* "Ukrainian Nights"[1] on the walls, furniture, and faces. Now and then a smoldering log bursts into flame in the fireplace and for a moment sheds the color of a conflagration on the faces, but that does not spoil the general harmony of the illumination. The general tone, as artists say, is sustained.

Sharamykin himself, an elderly man with the gray side-whiskers of a bureaucrat and gentle light-blue eyes sits, in an armchair in front of the fireplace, in the pose of someone who has just dined. Tenderness spreads over his face, his lips are composed into a sorrowful smile. At his feet Vice-Governor Lopnev, a dashing man of forty, sits on a footstool, lazily stretching out and sticking his feet toward the fireplace. Sharamykin's children, Nina, Kolya, Nadya, and Vanya, are playing near the piano. A light timidly darts through the slightly open door leading to Mrs. Sharamykin's study. There, behind the door, Sharamykin's wife, Anna Pavlovna, the president of the local ladies' committee, a lively and piquant little lady, aged thirty and a touch, sits at her desk. Her dark alert eyes run over the pages of a French novel through a pince-nez. Under the novel lies the disarranged annual report of the committee.

"Our town used to be more fortunate in that respect in previous years," says Sharamykin, blinking his gentle eyes at the smoldering fire. "Not a single winter passed without the visit of some star. There used to be famous actors and singers, while today, God only knows! Nobody visits except magicians and organ-grinders. No esthetic satisfaction whatsoever. We live in a wilderness. Yes, sir. . . . But do you remember that Italian tragedian, Your Excellency . . . what was his name? That dark-haired, tall . . . if I can just . . . Ah, yes! Luigi Ernesto de Ruggiero. . . . A remarkable talent . . . powerful! Sometimes he would utter a single word, and the whole theatre would shake. My Anyutochka took great interest in his talent. She went to a lot of trouble to get him a theatre, and sold enough tickets for ten performances. In return he taught her declamation and mime. A splendid man! He came here . . . if I'm not mistaken . . . about twelve years ago. . . . No, I'm off. . . . Less, maybe ten years ago. . . . Anyutochka, how old is our Nina?"

"She was nine on her last birthday!" Anna Pavlovna shouts from her study. "Why?"

"Nothing, dearest, I just asked. . . .—And good singers used to come. . . . Do you remember the *tenore di grazia*[2] Prilipchin? What

1. Green dominates A. I. Kuindzhi's painting by that name (1876).

a splendid man! What a figure! Blonde . . . such an expressive face, Parisian manners. . . . And what a voice, Your Excellency! He only had one shortcoming: he forced some notes and sang high B falsetto, but all the rest was fine. He said that he had studied with Tamberlick. . . . Anyutochka and I managed to get him a hall in the Assembly and out of gratitude he used to sing entire days and nights for us in return. . . . He taught Anyutochka to sing. . . . He came here, I remember it distinctly, during Lent in . . . in . . . twelve years ago. No, more. . . . Oh, God! There's memory for you! Anyutochka, how old is our Nadechka?"

"Twelve!"

"Twelve . . . if you add ten months. . . . Well, there you have it . . . thirteen! . . . There used to be more life in town formerly, too, somehow. . . . Take the benefit nights for example. What marvelous evenings we used to have. What a delight! There was singing, and acting, and recitations. . . . I remember after the war, when the Turkish prisoners were kept here. Anyutochka organized an evening for the benefit of the wounded. They collected eleven hundred rubles. . . . The Turkish officers were crazy about Anyutochka's voice, I remember, and kept kissing her hand. Hee, hee, hee. . . . They're a grateful nation, even if they are Asiatics. The evening was so successful that I put it down in the journal, would you believe it. That was, I remember it distinctly, in seventy-six . . . no! in seventy-seven. . . . No! Excuse me, when were the Turks here? Anyutochka, how old is our Kolechka?"

"I'm seven years old, Papa!" says Kolya, a swarthy kid with a dark complexion and hair black as coal.

"Yes, we've gotten old, and no longer have the energy we used to have! . . ." Lopnev agrees, heaving a sigh. "That's the reason. . . . Old age, my friend! There are no new people to take the initiative, and the old have gotten old. . . . They no longer have the old fire. When I was younger I didn't want anyone to have a tedious time. . . . I was your Anna Pavlovna's right-hand man. . . . Whether it was arranging a benefit night, or a lottery, or to entertain a visiting celebrity—I'd give up everything and start busying myself about arrangements. One winter, I remember, I fussed and rushed around so much that I even fell ill. . . . I'll never forget that winter! Do you remember what a show your Anna Pavlovna and I put on for the benefit of those who got burned out?"

"What year did that take place?"

"Not long ago. . . . In seventy-nine. . . . No, I think in eighty. Excuse me, how old is your Vanya?"

"Five!" Anna Pavlovna shouts from the study.

"Well, that was six years ago then. . . . Yes, sir, my friend, there were lots of things afoot then! It's not the same anymore! The old spark is missing!"

2. Or *tenore leggiero*: "lyric tenor."