THE WORLD'S CLASSICS

ANTON CHEKHOV

THE RUSSIAN MASTER

AND OTHER STORIES

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The Russian Master and Other Stories

Translated with an introduction and notes by
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INTRODUCTION

THE eleven items in this book have been chosen from the short stories of the author's maturity (1888–1904). One of these, *The Russian Master*, will be familiar to some readers under the arguably inaccurate title given to it by other translators: *The Teacher of Literature*. So Chekhovian a work is it that it might almost be called, without disparagement, a parody of the master by himself. Here we have the usual romantic illusions about love and marriage shipwrecked on the usual submerged reefs of domestic triviality and provincial vulgarity: all forming a most original sermon on the theme 'man does not live by bread alone'.

The Russian Master has a fascinating history. In 1889 Chekhov published what is now the first of its two chapters as a self-contained story under a different title, *Mediocrities*. It then had the happy ending which the text of Chapter I still retains, except, of course, that Chapter II now follows it, gradually but remorselessly reversing any such impression. As it happens, we know why Chekhov originally published his story in this incomplete and misleadingly optimistic form. He had read out a draft of what is now Chapter I to members of his family, confiding in them his intention of providing a continuation in which he would blow his young couple's happiness 'to smithereens'. Only when these kind-hearted listeners had appealed to him not to spoil the ending did he agree to publish the story in truncated form. But the happily-ending *Mediocrities* of 1889 turned out too 'sloppy' in its author's view, and by 1894 he was ready with the very different version, expanded and transformed by the addition of the astringent Chapter II, which we have here.

Since frustration so often accompanies love and marriage in Chekhov we need not be surprised at this course of events. But we may also note that the unfortunate Russian master and bridegroom Nikitin would have been equally doomed had he chosen to remain single. That option was one that Chekhov fully explored in *Doctor Startsev* (1898). Startsev (the 'Nikitin' of the later story) rejects his 'Masha' (Catherine Turkin), but only to sink into the bog of provincial complacency, card-playing and wine-bibbing against

which Nikitin proclaims his revolt—with what prospects of success we do not learn—in the last paragraph of *The Russian Master*.

Frustration in love, that typical Chekhov theme, is lavishly represented elsewhere in this volume.

In the short but powerful *His Wife* the sick doctor is the victim of his hateful, predatory Olga. In *Terror* the woman is more the victim of the man, while *The Order of St. Anne* has a male predator, the ludicrous Modeste Alekseyevich, seeking to victimize his beautiful young wife, only to have the tables turned on him in the end in one of the mature Chekhov's rare snap conclusions. Yet other amorous postures are found in *A Lady with a Dog*, perhaps the best-known of all Chekhov's stories. But though *chagrin d'amour* does indeed suffuse this saga of an experienced philanderer unexpectedly caught up in a profound passion, the dénouement by no means excludes some kind of happy solution. We are reminded that *A Lady with a Dog* was written during the early stages of the author's love affair with Olga Knipper, the actress who eventually became his wife. It reflects Chekhov's own hopes, but also his irritation with his invalid condition which forced him to winter in the south away from her—and from the city of Moscow for which he once said that he had come to yearn as much as any of his own Three Sisters.

Far more anomalous is the love pattern in another of Chekhov's most renowned stories, which also happens to have been Tolstoy's favourite: *Angel*, known to other translators as *The Darling*. The heroine, another of Chekhov's many Olgas, is remarkable for her habit of contracting happy marriages or marital unions—three in all, whereas we may search almost in vain elsewhere for any other Chekhov character who enjoys even one such satisfactory relationship. The story is exceptional too in that Chekhov for once describes provincial life without the contempt, unmistakable though restrained, which we detect in *Doctor Startsev*, *The Russian Master* and even *A Lady with a Dog*. And yet we shall err if we read *Angel* solely as the charming study of a kindly, simple woman whose heart overflows with love for her various spouses and the little boy whom she eventually looks after. We must also be alive, as always with this author, to contrary undercurrents; not sentiment unalloyed but the tension between sentiment and irony is the clue to *Angel*.

Yet another marital or cohabitational episode dominates *The Duel*, included here as an especially fine specimen of Chekhov's

longer work. It also contains the most sustained portrayal of a quarrel to come from a writer who was himself a notably peaceable man, but could yet delineate the squabbles of others with admirable skill. This he does in pitting *The Duel*'s slovenly, slipper-shufflling Layevsky (paramour of the no less slovenly Nadezhda) against the forthright, puritanical zoologist von Koren: that prophet of the survival of the fittest. But though von Koren eventually finds himself in a position to exterminate Layevsky—demonstrably unfit to live and therefore liquidation-ripe—in a pistols-at-dawn contest, that contest fizzles out in the predictable Chekhovian fiasco; and the text explicitly makes the point that the heroic age of duels *à la* Lermontov and Turgenev has now given way to a humdrum era when issues are less majestically clear-cut. How disappointing, though, that Chekhov should have fallen, in the last few pages of his *Duel*, from his usual high standards by suddenly pretending that the problems so successfully ventilated in his first ninety-odd pages were in fact no problems at all. *The Duel*'s feeble last chapter—in which a reformed Layevsky is seen married to a reformed Nadezhda, and in which both are forgiven by a reformed von Koren—gives the answer to those who complain of Chekhov's many unhappy endings. Here, after all, is a 'happy' ending: but one so unconvincing and banal that, though it cannot spoil so superb a story, it yet remains a considerable minor blemish.

Peasants reflects very different preoccupations. Of all Chekhov's works this created the greatest stir among his contemporaries in his own country. It may seem disappointingly slight on first reading, being hardly a story at all—rather a sequence of sketches set in an unprepossessing Russian village peopled by the usual drunkards, wife-beaters and wiseacres. Chekhov had drawn on his own experiences as resident from 1892 onwards of the village of Melikhovo near Moscow to illustrate all the most typical elements in late nineteenth-century Russian rural life. And since such down-trodden, backward rustics constituted four-fifths of the total population of the Russian Empire, numbering about a hundred million in all, his *Peasants* is a document of outstanding social importance. It also happens to furnish the quickest short cut available to understanding a crucial area of Russian society in his day. But if we choose, as well we may, to call *Peasants* a documentary, we must add that it is a documentary of genius. Only supreme literary skill could purvey, in a mere thirty pages,

more about this complex social situation than many another author has contrived in an entire volume, besides which Chekhov's restrained and subtle humour gives *Peasants* a dimension beyond the reach of other Russian rural studies. As for the abuse which greeted *Peasants* in Russia on first publication, that too forms a significant comment on the age. Chekhov had sinned, in the opinion of many contemporary intellectuals, by flouting an unspoken taboo whereby no author might mention such unedifying features of village life as dirt, squalor, dunkenness, brutality and deceitfulness without simultaneously proclaiming or implying the Russian muzhik to be a paragon of certain mysterious virtues visible only to the eye of faith. But Chekhov's eye was always that of a critical observer who, frankly, could not discern these mysterious rustic virtues. Whether he was discussing peasants or anything else, he always believed in reporting accurately what he saw. And in any case his unconventional and apparently unfavourable picture of the muzhik is fundamentally sympathetic, as must surely be evident to any sensitive reader of *Peasants*. Nor was Chekhov the squire of Melikhovo in the least hostile to the local rustics, for his outstanding record as devoted village doctor, assiduous schoolbuilder and good neighbour demonstrates the very opposite.

Finally there are the three remarkable stories *A Hard Case*, *Gooseberries* and *Concerning Love*. They are sometimes called a 'trilogy', being unique in Chekhov's fiction in possessing a single unifying theme illustrated by characters who spill over from one story to another. Each item in the trilogy contains as its principal element a story-within-the-story told by one of three narrators to one or both of the others. And all three stories denounce the tendency whereby, in Chekhov's view, human beings tend arbitrarily to fetter themselves with superfluous encumbrances—ideology, ambition, love—thus renouncing man's most precious birth-right, freedom. The hidebound schoolmaster Belikov who tyrannizes the townsfolk in *A Hard Case*; the ludicrous Nicholas Chimsha-Gimalaysky who sacrifices his whole life for a single plate of sour gooseberries; the unenterprising Alyokhin who cravenly renounces the one true love of his life—all three key characters admirably exemplify Chekhov's central theme. They have all made the wrong choice, as he shows, while also reminding us by implication of something which he does not show: that in Chekhov, alas, virtually all choices are wrong. What if Alyokhin had in fact

gone off with the seductive Mrs. Luganovich? What if the unfortunate Nicholas had never saved up to buy his estate complete with its gooseberry patch, and what if Belikov had never taught Greek or bullied his colleagues? They would only have embraced some other activity equally futile, equally self-limiting. Of this we may be certain, for anti-climax and the frustration of illusions remain basic to Chekhov's art at its best. And, as we are again reminded, the last pages of *The Duel* are there to show how right he was to stick to his true métier, how disastrous any attempt to break out of it might prove. We are also reminded that Chekhov, at his best, usually focuses on what does not—seldom on what does—happen.

By no means all Chekhov's readers will agree in finding failure and disillusionment to be such inseparable features of life as he seems to suggest in his works. And that Chekhov himself, as a man, had an outlook far less melancholy than that seemingly implied by Chekhov the artist we know from the rich source material of his biography: his personal letters, totalling over 4,000, and the many memoirs about him. Nor, in order to enjoy Chekhov's work, need readers feel any more obliged than did he himself (in his non-literary capacity) to adopt the philosophy of all-embracing frustration apparently deducible from his writings.

Rather may we marvel at the skill with which this arguably distorted philosophy has been used as a prism to display the human predicament in so original, so exhilarating, and above all so ultimately undistorting a projection.

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A CHRONOLOGY OF ANTON CHEKHOV

All dates are given old style.

1860	16 or 17 January. Born in Taganrog, a port on the Sea of Azov in south Russia.
1876	His father goes bankrupt. The family moves to Moscow, leaving Anton to finish his schooling.
1879	Joins family and enrols in the Medical Faculty of Moscow University.
1880	Begins to contribute to *Strekoza* ('Dragonfly'), a St. Petersburg comic weekly.
1882	Starts to write short stories and a gossip column for *Oskolki* ('Splinters') and to depend on writing for an income.
1884	Graduates in medicine. Shows early symptoms of tuberculosis.
1885–6	Contributes to *Peterburgskaya gazeta* ('St. Petersburg Gazette') and *Novoye vremya* ('New Time').
1886	March. Letter from D. V. Grigorovich encourages him to take writing seriously. First collection of stories: *Motley Stories*.
1887	Literary reputation grows fast. Second collection of stories: *In the Twilight*. 19 November. First Moscow performance of *Ivanov*: mixed reception.
1888	First publication (*The Steppe*) in a serious literary journal, *Severny vestnik* ('The Northern Herald').
1889	31 January. First St. Petersburg performance of *Ivanov*: widely and favourably reviewed. June. Death of brother Nicholas from tuberculosis.
1890	April–December. Crosses Siberia to visit the penal settlement on Sakhalin Island. Returns via Hong Kong, Singapore and Ceylon.
1891	First trip to western Europe: Italy and France.
1892	March. Moves with family to small country estate at Melikhovo, fifty miles south of Moscow.
1895	First meeting with Tolstoy.

1896 17 October. First—disastrous—performance of *The Seagull* in St. Petersburg.

1897 Suffers severe haemorrhage.

1897–8 Winters in France. Champions Zola's defence of Dreyfus.

1898 Beginning of collaboration with the newly founded Moscow Art Theatre. Meets Olga Knipper. Spends the winter in Yalta, where he meets Gorky.

17 December. First Moscow Art Theatre performance of *The Seagull*: successful.

1899 Completes the building of a house in Yalta, where he settles with mother and sister.

26 October. First performance of *Uncle Vanya* (written ?1896).

1899–1901 First complete edition of his works (10 volumes).

1901 31 January. *Three Sisters* first performed.

25 May. Marries Olga Knipper.

1904 17 January. First performance of *The Cherry Orchard*.

2 July. Dies in Badenweiler, Germany.

CONTENTS

HIS WIFE

'I THOUGHT I told you not to tidy my desk,' said Nicholas. 'I can't find anything when you've been round tidying. Where's that telegram got to? Where did you put it? Would you mind having a look? It's from Kazan, dated yesterday.'

The maid, a pale, very slim girl, seemed unconcerned. She did find several telegrams in the basket under the desk and handed them to the doctor without a word, but those were all local telegrams from his patients. Then they searched the drawing-room and his wife Olga's room.

It was past midnight. Nicholas knew that his wife would not be back for a long time, not till five in the morning at least. He did not trust her and felt depressed and could not sleep when she stayed out late. He despised his wife, her bed, her looking-glass, her boxes of chocolates and all these lilies-of-the-valley and hyacinths that came from someone every day and made the whole house smell as sickly-sweet as a florist's shop. On nights like this he grew irritable, moody and snappish, and he felt that he simply must have yesterday's telegram from his brother, though there was nothing in the thing beyond the compliments of the season.

On the table in his wife's room he did turn up a telegram under a box of writing-paper and glanced at it. It came from Monte Carlo and was addressed to his wife, care of his mother-in-law. The signature was *Michel*. The doctor could not make head or tail of it as it was in some foreign language, English apparently.

Who could *Michel* be? Why Monte Carlo? And why send it care of his mother-in-law?

Suspicions, conjectures, deductions—seven years of married life had made such things second nature to him and he often thought that he had had enough practice at home to turn him into a first-class detective.

He went back to his study and began thinking things over, whereupon it all came back to him. About eighteen months ago he had been in St. Petersburg with his wife. They had lunched at Cubat's Restaurant with an old school friend of his, a transport engineer who had introduced a young man of twenty-two or twenty-three called Michael with a short, rather odd surname—Rees. Two months later the doctor had seen the young man's photograph in his wife's album with some

writing in French. 'In memory of the present and in hope for the future.' Then he had run across the man a couple of times at his mother-in-law's. That was when his wife had taken to going out a lot and coming home at all hours of the morning. She kept asking him to let her have a passport so that she could go abroad. He had refused and for days on end all hell had been let loose at home and he could hardly face the servants.

Six months ago Nicholas's medical colleagues had decided that he was developing T.B. and advised him to drop everything and go to the Crimea, hearing which Olga put on an air of great alarm and started making up to her husband. She told him how cold and boring the Crimea was and how much better Nice would be. She would go with him and nurse him and see that he had some peace and quiet.

Now he knew why his wife was so set on Nice This *Michel* lived at Monte Carlo.

He picked up an English–Russian dictionary and gradually put together the following by translating the words and guessing the meaning:

DRINK TO MY DEARLY BELOVED KISS TINY FOOT
THOUSAND TIMES EAGERLY AWAIT ARRIVAL

Now he saw what a laughing-stock he would have made of himself if he had agreed to take his wife to Nice. He was so upset that he was ready to cry, and began stalking from room to room in great distress. A sensitive man of humble origins, he felt wounded in his pride. He clenched his fists and scowled disgustedly, wondering how he—the son of a village priest, brought up at a church school, a plain, blunt man and a surgeon by profession—could ever have let himself be enslaved. Why this shameful surrender to a creature so feeble, mean-spirited, dishonest and generally beneath contempt?

'Tiny foot!' he muttered, screwing up the telegram. 'Tiny foot my foot!'

Falling in love, proposing, seven years of marriage—nothing remained of all that but the memory of long, fragrant hair, clouds of soft lace and a tiny foot. Yes, it actually was very small and pretty. Those early embraces now seemed to have left him with the feel of silk and lace on his hands and face, and nothing else.

Nothing else, that is, unless you count hysteria, screams, reproaches, threats and lies—barefaced, treacherous lies.

At his father's house in the village, he remembered, a bird sometimes chanced to fly in from outside and would crash furiously against the

windows and knock things over. And that is what this woman was like, flying into his life from a completely different world and creating sheer havoc. The best years of his life were over and they had been hell, his hopes of happiness had been dashed and mocked, his health was gone, and his house was full of the paraphernalia of a vulgar coquette. Out of the ten thousand roubles that he earned each year he could not raise even ten to send to his old mother and he was in debt to the tune of fifteen thousand. A gang of thugs could have camped out in his home without making such a total wreck of his life as this woman had done, or so it seemed.

He began coughing and gasping for breath. He should have gone to bed to get warm, but he could not. He kept walking about the house or sitting down at his desk, doodling nervously with a pencil and writing automatically, 'Writing practice. . . . Tiny foot. . . .'

By five o'clock he felt quite weak and was blaming himself for everything. He felt that Olga should have married someone else who could have had a good influence on her. That might have turned her into a good, decent woman—who knows?—whereas he was a poor psychologist who knew nothing of the female heart, quite apart from being so dull and insensitive. . . .

'I'm not long for this world,' he thought. 'A walking corpse like me shouldn't get in living people's way. To stand out for one's supposed rights now—that really would be silly and eccentric. I'll have it out with her. Let her go off with her lover—I'll give her a divorce and take the blame. . . .'

Olga arrived in the end. She came straight into the study without taking off her white coat, hat and galoshes, and flopped down in an armchair.

'Horrid, horrid fat boy!' she panted with a sob. 'Thoroughly dishonest, I call it! Beastly!' She stamped. 'I can't, I won't, I shan't put up with it!'

'Why, what is it?' asked Nicholas, going towards her.

'A student—Azarbekov—has been seeing me home and he's lost my purse with fifteen roubles that Mother gave me.'

She was crying in real earnest, like a little girl, and not only her handkerchief, but even her gloves were wet with tears.

'It can't be helped,' sighed the doctor. 'If it's lost it's lost and that's that. Do calm down, I want a word with you.'

'I'm not made of money and I can't afford to be so slapdash. He says he'll pay it back, but I don't believe him, he's too poor. . . .'

Her husband asked her to calm down and listen, but she kept on about the student and this missing fifteen roubles.

'Look,' he said irritably, 'I'll let you have twenty-five roubles in the morning. Only please do shut up.'

'I must go and change,' she sobbed. 'Well, I can't talk seriously with my coat on, can I? Whatever next!'

Helping her off with her coat and galoshes, he caught a whiff of the white wine that she liked with oysters—she could certainly put away the food and drink, for all her dainty looks.

She went to her room and came back after a while, having changed her clothes and powdered her face, but with eyes swollen from crying. She sat down and vanished inside her lace négligé, and all her husband could make out in this sea of pink billows was her hair all over the place and that tiny foot in a slipper.

'Well, what is it?' she asked, rocking herself in the chair.

'I happened to see this,' said the doctor and handed her the telegram.

She read it and shrugged.

'What of it?' she asked, rocking harder. 'It's an ordinary New Year's greeting, that's all. There's no mystery about it.'

'You're banking on me not knowing English. I know I don't, but I do have a dictionary. That telegram's from Rees. He drinks to his beloved and sends you a thousand kisses. But never mind that, never mind that,' the doctor hurried on. 'I haven't the faintest wish to reproach you or make a scene. We've had scenes and reproaches enough and it's about time we stopped. What I say is this—you're free to live as you like.'

There was a short silence. She began crying softly.

'I'm giving you your freedom so that you won't need to pretend and lie any more,' went on Nicholas. 'If you love that young man, well then, love him. And if you want to join him abroad, go ahead. You're young and healthy and I'm an invalid, I'm not long for this world. In other words—well, you see what I mean.'

He felt too upset to go on. Weeping, Olga admitted in a self-pitying voice that she did love Rees, had been with him on jaunts out of town, visited him in his hotel room—and really was very keen on this trip abroad.

'You see, I'm not hiding anything,' she sighed. 'I'm putting my cards on the table and I implore you once again to do the decent thing and give me my passport.'

'That's just what I'm telling you—you're free.'

She moved to a chair nearer him so that she could look at his face. She distrusted him and wanted to read his innermost thoughts. She never trusted people and always suspected them, however well-meaning, of being up to some dirty little trick and having an eye to the main chance. As she scrutinized his face her eyes seemed to flash green like a cat's.

'Then when do I get my passport?' she asked quietly.

'Never,' he suddenly wanted to answer, but took a grip on himself and said, 'Whenever you like.'

'I'm only going for a month.'

'You can stay with Rees for good. I'm giving you a divorce and taking the blame, so Rees can marry you.'

Olga looked astonished. 'But I don't *want* a divorce!' she said forcefully. 'I'm not asking for one. Just give me the passport, that's all.'

'But why no divorce?' The doctor was beginning to lose his temper. 'You're a strange woman, I must say. If you're really fond of him and he loves you, you two can't do better than marry, placed as you are. Don't tell me that given the choice you actually prefer adultery to marriage!'

'Oh, I *see*,' she said, moving away. An evil, vindictive expression came into her face. 'I see your little game. You're fed up with me and you just want to get rid of me by landing me with this divorce. But I'm not quite such a fool as you think, thank you very much. I'm not having a divorce and I'm not leaving you, oh dear me no. Firstly, I want to keep my social position,' she went on quickly as though afraid that he might stop her. 'Secondly, I'm twenty-seven and Rees is only twenty-three. In a year's time he'll tire of me and throw me over. And what's more, I'm not sure I shall be so keen on him much longer, if you want to know. . . . So there! I'm sitting tight!'

'Then out of this house you go!' shouted Nicholas, stamping. 'I'll throw you out! You're a vile, disgusting creature.'

'We'll see about that,' she said and left the room.

It was broad daylight outside, but the doctor still sat at his desk doodling and automatically writing, 'My dear Sir. . . . A tiny foot. . . .'

Or else he walked about, stopping in the drawing-room in front of a photograph taken soon after his wedding seven years ago. He looked at it for some time.

It was a family group. There were his father-in-law, his mother-in-law and his wife Olga, then aged twenty. And there was he in his role of happy young husband. Father-in-law was clean-shaven, plump,