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ANTON CHEKHOV

Selected Stories

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INTRODUCTION

As a medical student in Moscow in the 1880s, the young Anton Chekhov began writing humorous short stories for magazines. These were immediately popular and by 1888 he had already been recognised in Russia as an eminent young writer, his stories appearing regularly in the leading literary journals of St Petersburg and Moscow. His influence on European literature has been immense. In England almost all his works began to appear in translation from as early as 1903. Writers such as Shaw, Virginia Woolf, H. E. Bates, Elizabeth Bowen, Somerset Maugham and, particularly, Katherine Mansfield, who was possibly the greatest exponent of his method, have all expressed their admiration of his supreme artistry.

Chekhov's originality lies in his unique combination of tragedy, comedy and pathos, and above all in his peculiar technique which relies on the sensitivity and intelligence of his readers. Chekhov's stories, like his plays, are essentially concerned with the incommunicable, and have been criticised by the uninitiated for their lack of action. Chekhov presented people as he saw them, often engaged in seemingly irrelevant or trivial incidents that are actually laden with underlying implications. The requirements of the magazine market had taught him to be succinct, and he never says more than is necessary, supplying only the most scant outlines. The structure of Chekhov's stories has been compared to that of lace, whose beauty depends as much on what is left out as on what is put in. His method demands that the reader fills in details for himself. The climax or major events are often untold, happening in the reader's imagination, with the effect that Chekhov's characters continue to exist beyond the confines of the story.

This selection of his tales, published originally in England in 1918 as *Stories of Russian Life*, contains some of Chekhov's earliest published works. 'Death of an Official' and 'Lean and Fat' were both

written in 1883, and though essentially comic pieces recounted with cool detachment, they both, particularly 'Death of an Official', expose defects of the pre-Revolutionary regime in Russia which encouraged the most obsequious servility and consequent absence of self-respect with its hierarchical systems. Typically, Chekhov expresses no moral judgement himself, leaving this to his readers.

Stories such as 'Children' and 'Little Jack' illustrate Chekhov's extraordinary ability to inhabit his characters, and to move smoothly from the consciousness of one to another. He will adopt the rhythms and vocabulary of a particular character's speech in his narrative so that it becomes difficult to distinguish an authorial voice, and to detect where Chekhov's sympathies lie. In 'The Malefactor', and indeed many other stories, Chekhov shows an issue from two entirely different perspectives, using a gentle irony which is comic and yet sheds serious doubt on the validity of an absolute established morality. 'The Head Gardener's Tale' also questions conventional systems of justice, and seems in its concern with 'the beneficent influence of faith in mankind' to reflect the author's own attitude.

Compassion pervades these tales which repeatedly illuminate unfulfilled lives. 'Dreams', 'The Trousseau' and 'Not Wanted' reveal the sad disparity between men's grand dreams and the mean reality of existence. Chekhov makes no apology for humanity, treating his characters without sentimentality and equally without cynicism or condemnation. His view is fundamentally tragic, for he is well aware of the intolerable forces we all confront, yet his delight in farcical situations and in the incongruities of human behaviour tempers this. Chekhov's charity and warm humour seem to be all-embracing, and even his most unlikely heroes are treated with melancholy tenderness.

Chekhov's influence cannot be overestimated. His power to evoke atmosphere, seen in the story 'Master Night', is masterly. With his singular gift for distillation, he created a new art-form out of the very brief sketch, though 'In the Ravine' and other longer stories of this collection show that he is no less capable when writing at greater length. The self-effacing charm of Chekhov's personality is reflected in his simple, clear style which has ensured the enduring popularity of these tales where the most ordinary individuals become figures of universal relevance. Chekhov is truly the grand-master of the short story.

Born in 1860 in the small town of Taganrog on the Sea of Azov, Anton Pavlovich Chekhov was the son of a grocer whose own father had been a serf. When Chekhov was sixteen, his father, who was heavily in debt, took the rest

of the family to Moscow, leaving him behind to finish his schooling. Chekhov obtained a scholarship to study medicine at the University of Moscow, and began to write stories, articles and anecdotes for comic journals to help support the family. His literary reputation grew slowly, and by the time he qualified as a doctor in 1884, his work was appearing regularly in the leading literary journals of St Petersburg and Moscow. In 1886 his first book, Motley Stories, *was published, and he met the newspaper owner Alexei Suvorin, who invited him to contribute to the magazine* New Time. *Another collection of tales,* In the Twilight, *won him the Pushkin Prize in 1888. That same year he published the long story,* The Steppe, *to much acclaim, and his first play,* Ivanov. *During the next decade Chekhov maintained his prolific production of short stories, but the first staging of his celebrated play* The Seagull *at the State Theatre of St Petersburg in 1896 was a disastrous flop due to the director's failure to understand Chekhov's intentions. Chekhov was dogged by ill-health and in 1898 he was forced to move to Yalta, where he wrote his great plays,* Uncle Vanya *(1900),* The Three Sisters *(1901) and* The Cherry Orchard *(1904). In 1898* The Seagull *had been successfully revived by the Moscow Art Theatre and subsequent productions of Chekhov's later plays established that theatre's reputation. In 1901 Chekhov married the Art Theatre actress, Olga Knipper. He died of tuberculosis in July 1904, just six months after the première of the* Cherry Orchard, *which had opened on his forty-fourth birthday. He is considered one of the greatest and most influential figures of Russian literature and drama.*

FURTHER READING

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STORIES OF RUSSIAN LIFE

Overseasoned

ON ARRIVING at Deadville Station, Gleb Smirnoff, the surveyor, found that the farm to which his business called him still lay some thirty or forty miles farther on. If the driver should be sober and the horses could stand up, the distance would be less than thirty miles; with a fuddled driver and old skates for horses, it might amount to fifty.

'Will you tell me, please, where I can get some post-horses?' asked the surveyor of the station-master.

'What? Post-horses? You won't find even a stray dog within a hundred miles of here, let alone post-horses! Where do you want to go?'

'To Devkino, General Hohotoff's farm.'

'Well,' yawned the station-master, 'go round behind the station; there are some peasants there that sometimes take passengers.'

The surveyor sighed and betook himself wearily to the back of the station. There, after a long search and much disputing and agitating, he at last secured a huge, lusty peasant, surly, pock-marked, wearing a ragged coat of grey cloth and straw shoes.

'What a devil of a wagon you have!' grumbled the surveyor, climbing in. 'I can't tell which is the front and which is the back.'

'Can't you? The horse's tail is in front and where your honour sits is the back.'

The pony was young but gaunt, with sprawling legs and ragged ears. When the driver stood up and beat it with his rope whip, it only shook its head; when he rated it soundly and beat it a second time the wagon groaned and shuddered as if in a fever; at the third stroke the wagon rocked, and at the fourth, moved slowly away.

'Will it be like this all the way?' asked the surveyor, violently shaken and wondering at the ability of Russian drivers for combining the gentle crawl of a tortoise with the most soul-racking bumping.

'We'll get there,' the driver soothed him. 'The little mare is young and spry. Only let her once get started and there is no stopping her. Get up, you devil!'

They left the station at dusk. To the right stretched a cold, dark plain so boundless and vast that if you crossed it no doubt you would come to the Other End of Nowhere. The cold autumn sunset burnt out slowly where the edge of it melted into the sky. To the left, in the fading light, some little mounds rose up that might have been either trees or last year's haystacks. The surveyor could not see what lay ahead, for here the whole landscape was blotted out by the broad, clumsy back of the driver. The air was still, but frosty and cold.

'What desolation!' thought the surveyor, trying to cover his ears with his coat collar; 'not a hut nor a house! If we were beset and robbed here not a soul would know it, not if we were to fire cannons. And that driver isn't trustworthy. What a devil of a back he has! It is as much as a man's life is worth even to touch a child of nature like that with his forefinger! He has an ill-looking snout, like a wild animal. Look here, friend,' asked the surveyor, 'what's your name?'

'My name? Klim.'

'Well, Klim, how is it about here? Not dangerous? No one plays any pranks, do they?'

'Oh, Lord preserve us, no! Who would there be to play pranks?'

'That's right. But, in any case, I have three revolvers here' – the surveyor lied – 'and, you know, it's a bad plan to joke with a revolver. One revolver is a match for ten robbers.'

Night fell. Suddenly the wagon creaked, groaned, trembled, and turned to the left, as if against its will.

'Where is he taking me now?' thought the surveyor. 'He was going straight ahead, and now he has suddenly turned to the left. I am afraid the scoundrel is carrying me off to some lonely thicket – and – and – things have been known to happen. Listen!' he said to the driver, 'so you say there is no danger here? Well, that's a pity. I love a good fight with robbers. I am small and sickly to look at, but I have the strength of an ox. Three robbers attacked me once, and what do you think? I shook one of them so that – well, it killed him. The other two I had sent to hard labour in Siberia. I can't think where all my strength comes from. I could take a big rascal like you in one hand – and – and – skin him!'

Klim looked round at the surveyor, blinked all over his face, and dealt his pony a blow.

'Yes, my friend,' continued the surveyor, 'Heaven help the robber that falls into my hands! Not only would he be left without arms or legs, but he would have to answer for his crimes in court, where all the judges and lawyers are friends of mine. I am a government official, and

a very important one. When I am travelling like this the government knows it and keeps an eye on me to see that no one does me any harm. There are policemen and police captains hidden in the bushes all along the road. Stop! Stop!' yelled the surveyor suddenly. 'Where are you going? Where are you taking me to?'

'Can't you see? Into the wood.'

'So he is,' thought the surveyor. 'I was frightened, I mustn't show my feelings; he has already seen that I am afraid of him. What makes him look around at me so often? He must be meditating something. At first we barely moved, and now we are flying. Listen, Klim, why do you hurry your horse so?'

'I am not hurrying her; she is running away of her own accord. When once she begins running away, nothing will stop her. She is sorry herself that her legs are made that way.'

'That's a lie, my friend, I can see it's a lie. I advise you not to go so fast. Hold your horse in, do you hear? Hold him in!'

'Why?'

'Because – because – I have four friends following me from the station. I want them to catch up. They promised to catch me up in this wood. It will be jollier travelling with them. They are big, strong fellows, every one of them has a revolver. Why do you look round and jump about as if you were sitting on a tack? Hey? See here, I – I – there is nothing about me worth looking at, there is nothing interesting about me in the least – unless it is my revolvers! Here, if you want to see them I'll take them out and show them to you – let me get them.'

The surveyor pretended to be searching in his pockets, and at that moment something happened which not even his worst fears had led him to expect. Klim suddenly threw himself out of the wagon and ran off on all fours through the forest.

'Help!' he shouted. 'Help! Take my horse, take my wagon, accursed one, only spare me my soul! Help!'

The sound of his hurrying footsteps died away, the dry leaves rustled, all was still. When this unexpected judgement fell on him, the surveyor's first act was to stop the horse; then he settled himself more comfortably in the wagon and began to think.

'So he has taken fright and made off, the fool! Well, what shall I do now? I don't know the way, so I can't go on alone, and, anyway, if I did, it would look as if I had stolen his horse. What shall I do? Klim! Klim!'

'Klim!' answered the echo.

At the idea of spending the whole night alone in a dark forest, listening to the wolves, the echo, and the snorting of the lean pony, the