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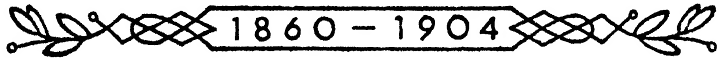

1860 – 1904

FOREIGN LANGUAGES PUBLISHING HOUSE
M O S C O W

В. ЕРМИЛОВ

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CONTENTS

	Page
"There Was No Childhood in My Childhood"	7
Inklings of Talent	19
"Good-Bye, Home! Good-Bye to the Old Life!"	24
Head of the Family	33
In Those Far-Off, Remote Times....	41
The Dance of the "Dragon-flies"	44
Birth of an Innovator. The Ugly Duckling	47
The Satirist	61
The Master	84
His Friends and Foes	107
The Great Worker. What Is Talent?	148
Hard Times	170
Loving Foe	199
Death of a Brother	211
The Ruling Principle	215
Distant Journey	220
Melikhovo	234
Protest	238
"We live on the Eve of a Great Triumph"	247
The Not-Heroes	250
"It Is Impossible To Go On Like This"	295
"I Have Believed in Progress Since My Childhood"	300
Fighting "The Evil One"	304
Happiness Lies in the Future!	308

	Page
The Sea-gull	329
Everything Must Be Beautiful about the Human Being!	349
The Failure of *The Sea-gull*	364
The Dreyfus Case	369
Encounter with the Art Theatre	373
Yalta	377
Before the Storm	385
"Welcome, New Life!"	393
In 1904	411

"THERE WAS NO CHILDHOOD IN MY CHILDHOOD"

Anyone who reflects upon the destiny of Anton Pavlovich Chekhov, shop-boy behind the counter of his father's country-town grocery, schoolboy coach from an impoverished middle-class family, medical student, purveyor of entertaining stories to run-of-the-mill comic papers, and later writer of world fame, will be struck first and foremost by the salient feature of this destiny—the overwhelming nature of the obstacles unfavourable to the growth of talent. An unflagging concentration of inner forces, an indomitable will for the creative struggle were required. Life seemed to be subjecting Chekhov to perpetual ordeals, as if to prove his title to genius. His path was beset with snares cunning enough to trap many a gifted but weaker man, such as his elder brothers, the writer Alexander and the artist Nikolai, both generously endowed with talent, but unable to understand that talent is of little or no avail without an unremitting struggle to keep it alive, without meticulous, painstaking toil, and without a great number of other essentials.

Chekhov paid for all he attained with his health, with incessant arduous labour, with loneliness, and with efforts at self-improvement which never let up for a single moment, and demanded all his spiritual powers.

The story of his life and work—and for him, life was work—is a story of talent and will-power overcoming tremendous obstacles.

Anton Pavlovich Chekhov was born on the 17th of January, 1860,* in Taganrog.

The Chekhov family was richly endowed with natural gifts. The crystal spring of talent bubbled up in almost every member of it.

The grandfather of Anton Pavlovich, Yegor Mikhailovich Chekhov, was a peasant from the Voronezh Province, one of the serfs of the landed proprietor Chertkov, father of the well-known disciple of Tolstoi. Yegor Mikhailovich was blessed with perseverance, organizational and administrative ability, and a clear brain. But he was harsh and tyrannical, and subject to frequent fits of unreasonable rage.

He had one aim in life, a dream towards the realization of which he pressed steadily forward, stinting himself in every way. This dream was of freedom for himself and his children. And it came true. Yegor Mikhailovich bought the liberty of himself, his wife, and their three sons from his owner at the price of three and a half thousand rubles—a large sum for those days. There was not enough money to buy off his daughter, but the proprietor graciously set her also at liberty. As soon as he had purchased his freedom, Yegor Mikhàilovich secured the post of bailiff on the Don estates of Count Platov, son of the hero of 1812, the famous Ataman Platov.

Though he had experienced the horrors of slavery in his own person, Yegor Mikhailovich by no means renounced the principle of slavery and oppression for others.

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* All dates are given according to the Julian calendar (Old Style).

Anton Pavlovich remembered that his grandfather had been "a rabid advocate of serfdom."

The ferocious temper of Yegor Mikhailovich was not incompatible with a certain eccentricity and playful imaginativeness, showing themselves every now and then between the lines in his correspondence. "My dear, gentle Pavel Yegorovich," he wrote to his son, the father of the future writer, though Pavel Yegorovich, far from displaying the slightest gentleness, actually surpassed his father in unbridled tyranny. Perhaps Yegor Mikhailovich sensed in his son something hidden from others—a latent, unobtrusive dreaminess. However that may be, the children of Pavel Yegorovich must surely have found the word "gentle," as applied to their father, somewhat strange. They were only too familiar with the "gentleness" of their father! In a letter to his brother Alexander (1889), in which he reproached the latter for despotism and irritability in his dealings with his wife and children, Anton Pavlovich wrote:

"I would ask you to remember that tyranny and lies wrecked your mother's youth. Tyranny and lies distorted our childhood to an extent hard to remember without nausea and horror. Remember the horror and disgust we used to feel when Father made a row at the dinner-table because the soup was oversalted, or called Mother a fool. . . .

"Tyranny is a triply-accursed crime. . . ."

Tyranny played a fatal part in the lives of several generations of Chekhovs. In three generations of the Chekhov family—Yegor Mikhailovich, his son Pavel Yegorovich and, finally, his grandson Alexander Pavlovich—we meet with the quality of arbitrariness and the unbridled, merciless imposition of their own will.

At the same time these three generations were notable for that imaginativeness which goes with artistic tendencies.

The writer's father, Pavel Yegorovich Chekhov, styled himself a "merchant" by profession, but in his soul he was an artist.

His life as shop assistant to the eminent merchant Kobilin, who was also the mayor of Taganrog, differed little from that of the shop assistants described in the plays of Ostrovsky, and later by Anton Pavlovich Chekhov himself, in his story *Three Years*. From dawn to dark he had to ingratiate himself with all and sundry, to cringe and smile, to submit with a good grace to blows and cuffs. The yoke had to be borne for the meagre savings it was possible to scrape up.

Like his father before him, Pavel Yegorovich had an aim in life—to extricate himself from the state of servility and win through to independence. He dreamed of becoming the owner of a shop. With characteristic grandeur, however, it was not of a shop, but of a "commercial enterprise," that Pavel Yegorovich dreamed. And thanks to his extraordinary perseverance, he attained the fulfilment of his dream. In 1857 he opened a grocery shop, with a side-line in haberdashery.

But Pavel Yegorovich was not so single-minded as Yegor Mikhailovich, who had allowed nothing to stand in the way of his intentions. Pavel Yegorovich was impeded by his soul of an artist.

His gifts were diverse. He taught himself to play the violin. Anton Chekhov's love for music was handed down to him from his father. Pavel Yegorovich had artistic as well as musical leanings ; he painted in oils and went in for icon-painting. Of himself, his brothers, and his sister, Anton Pavlovich said: "We get our talent from our father, and our soul from our mother."

Pavel Yegorovich longed for musical grace, harmonious order, artistic beauty in daily life, but his lack of education prevented him from expending his talents and energies on anything but eccentricity. His chief obsession

was the church choir he had created, which took up much of his time, to the detriment of his business. By means of dogged perseverance he made his choir the best in the town. He selected his singers from among the blacksmiths, and the alto and treble voices were supplied by his own sons. It was this choir, and not his business, which constituted the real interest of his life.

For his sons the choir was a curse. In an article called "Anton Pavlovich Chekhov as Choir-Boy," Chekhov's brother Alexander writes:

"Poor Anton, a growing lad, with an undeveloped chest, a poor ear for music, and a weak voice, had a bad time. Many tears were shed during choir rehearsals, and much healthy childish sleep was lost owing to these rehearsals, which went on till late at night. In everything regarding the church services Pavel Yegorovich was punctual, strict and exacting. If a morning service was to be held on some great holiday he would wake his children at two or three o'clock and drag them to church in all weathers.

"... Pavel Yegorovich was profoundly convinced that, in compelling his children to sing in the choir, he was performing a good and pious act, and would bow to no arguments or persuasions."

All their lives the Chekhov brothers detested a religious education, with its sanctimonious, hypocritical, slavish spirit. Anton Pavlovich said that any religious education reminded him of a screen, which showed sweetly-smiling childish countenances on the outside, but behind which went on torture and martyrdom.

"I was bred up in religion myself," he wrote, "and received a religious education with its singing in the choir, its readings from the Apostles, and the psalms in church, regular attendance at services, the compulsion to assist at the altar and ring the bells. And what is the result? I remember my childhood as a pretty gloomy

affair, and I am not a bit religious now. When my two brothers and I sang the trio: 'Hear my prayer,' standing up in the church, while everyone looked at us with emotion and envied our parents, we felt like little convicts doing hard labour all the time."

And so the aspirations of Pavel Yegorovich towards beauty and grace were transformed into the very opposite of beauty or grace, and became the essence of torture.

In the same way Pavel Yegorovich's love of discipline and of harmonious order was crudely distorted and became a source of anguish to his children. Here are a few details which are characteristic of his "educational system." We are looking somewhat ahead, towards the Moscow life of the Chekhov family, which followed on the Taganrog period. Completely ruined, Pavel Yegorovich fled secretly from his creditors in Taganrog to Moscow, where the Chekhov family dragged out a famished existence in a wretched tenement in what was then an obscure Moscow district, mainly inhabited by prostitutes —Drachevka Street, off Trubnaya Square. The eldest son Alexander attended the physics and mathematics faculty of the University, and lived apart from the rest of the family; Anton remained to finish his studies at the Taganrog high school. In Moscow, too, Pavel Yegorovich insisted on the Taganrog routine, pinning up on the wall a schedule, solemnly entitled:

"Schedule of work and domestic duties for the needs of the household of the family of Pavel Chekhov, residing in Moscow.

"Nikolai Chekhov, 20 years old. To rise between five and seven, according to his own discretion and inner compulsion.

"Ivan Chekhov, 17 years old. To see to household affairs according to this schedule.

Mikhail Chekhov, 11½
Marya Chekhova, 14 } Regular attendance at 7 o'clock vespers, early mass 6:30, late mass 9:30 on holidays

"Confirmed by head of family for fulfilment according to schedule

"Head of family

"Pavel Chekhov.

"Any member of family failing to carry out these instructions, to receive, for first such offence, reproof, during which it is forbidden to cry."

This "schedule" was of a semi-facetious nature. When, however, the seventeen-year-old Ivan failed to take his part in "household affairs" Pavel Yegorovich "reproved" him, beating him so savagely in the yard that Ivan could not help bawling. The neighbours came running out to see what the matter was, and the proprietor of the house threatened to evict the family if there should be a repetition of such scenes.

If this was the way Pavel Yegorovich brought up his sons when they were almost grown-up, it is not hard to imagine the sort of treatment they received in childhood. Alexander Pavlovich relates that the first question put by his brother Anton to a friend he made at school was: "Do they often whip you?" On receiving the reply: "I am never whipped," Anton was amazed.

Of all the impressions branded on the soul of Anton Pavlovich in childhood, that of being whipped was the most humiliating. The memory of these whippings was never erased from his consciousness. He once said to V. I. Nemirovich-Danchenko, the famous theatre-manager: "You know, I have never been able to forgive my father for whipping me." The paternal castigations were first and foremost wounds inflicted on the boy's soul, his dignity as a human being.

When Chekhov said: "There was no childhood in my childhood," he implied much. In the first place there was nothing very suitable to a child in the very routine of his childhood—a routine closely approaching hard labour. Pavel Yegorovich's shop was open from five in the morning till eleven at night, and the only paid assistant was a shop-boy. Pavel Yegorovich not infrequently imposed the entire care of the shop on his sons. Their day was divided between the shop, the school, the shop again, endless choir rehearsals, and equally endless prayers in church and at home. In addition to all this, the children were set to learn crafts—Anton that of a tailor. There was, too, any amount of "household" work. From his earliest years the little Anton had to learn to keep accounts and, above all, to acquire skill in trading, which included both respectful behaviour to customers and the ability to give "short measure, short weight, and bring off all sorts of petty swindle," as Alexander Pavlovich wrote in his memoirs.

Humiliating corporal punishment, a strenuous routine of toil, perpetual lack of sleep—such was Chekhov's childhood, very different from the blissful childhood whose poetry rises before us from the pages of the novels of Lev Tolstoi, Aksakov, Alexei Tolstoi (*Nikita's Childhood*), and other writers from the ranks of the aristocracy. "I received so little kindness in my childhood," Chekhov wrote to the writer Tikhonov, to thank him for his cordial criticism of the play *Ivanov*, "that I still accept kindness as something unusual, something of which I have had little experience heretofore!"

It would, however, be wrong to describe the life of the Chekhov family as one of unrelieved gloom. The softening influence of Yevgenya Yakovlevna, the mother, must not be forgotten, nor must it be forgotten that the influence of Pavel Yegorovich on his children was far from being exclusively unfavourable. After all, he did try to

implant in his children from their earliest years habits of hard work, a sense of duty, responsibility, discipline. Admittedly, his methods of inculcating these qualities in the souls of his children were such as might have inspired them with disgust for any discipline whatever. And this was to a certain extent true in the cases of the elder sons, Alexander and Nikolai. Anton Pavlovich, however, succeeded in extracting the useful from the harmful in the paternal discipline. His attitude to his father, despite so many sad and gloomy passages, was one of respect and affection.

Pavel Yegorovich aspired to make his children truly educated persons. He felt that if he had himself received an education he could have done something of use, something important for humanity. And he wanted his children to be more successful than he had been. He sent them all to high school, employed a music teacher for them, had them taught languages at an early age. The elder sons spoke French fluently while still in their teens.

And yet all that there was of good both in the nature of Yegor Pavlovich and his attitude to his children, was marred by middle-class vulgarity, eccentricity, tyrannical ways, and distorted by the hardships of life.

The eccentricities of their near relatives—their father and their uncle Mitrofan Yegorovich—were not lost on the young Chekhovs. A habit of observation, a keen sense of the ridiculous, a profound instinct for what was false or affected, characterized the little Anton and his older brothers. Their consistent ridicule of eccentricity constituted what may be called instinctive talent, as yet undeveloped, unconscious, but already nervously apprehensive of the dangers threatening it.

It is noteworthy that the first published story by Anton Chekhov known to us—*Letter from a Don Landowner* (1880)—is a parody of the epistolary style of his grandfather Yegor Mikhailovich and his uncle Mitrofan Yegoro-

vich. These letters are distinguished by a combination of bombast and illiteracy, the endeavour to invest the commonest things and everyday events with a pompous dignity. The hero of *Letter from a Don Landowner*, a sombre individual of the Prishibeyev* type, with absurd pretensions to learning, has very little in common with Mitrofan Yegorovich, who was not in the least like Prishibeyev. Anton Pavlovich regarded his uncle as a "kindly soul, a man with a good, pure, cheerful disposition." And yet Chekhov saw fit to parody the style and tone of his letters.

By making their uncle's failings the target of their sarcasm, Alexander and Anton at the same time took aim at those of their father.

One of the ways by which the young Chekhov brothers endeavoured to fight their principal foe—middle-class vulgarity—was ridiculing the eccentricities of their father and their uncle. It was precisely vulgarity which distorted and marred all that was good and pure in their father and uncle. In the solemn adornment and elevation of everyday life, the attempt to cloak ugly, pitiful reality revolving around the kopek, may be seen the outlook and aesthetic standards of vulgarity. (In a letter written in 1888, Anton Pavlovich bitterly remarks: "The fact that I was born, brought up, had my schooling, and began writing in an atmosphere in which money played a disgracefully important role, has injured me terribly.") It is precisely vulgarity which underlies the endeavour to adorn pitiful reality and thus to be reconciled with it.

From his childhood Chekhov detested lies in all their aspects—not for nothing, in the letter to Alexander already quoted, did he specify two foes—tyranny and lies. He felt the falsity of the choir-singing when everyone

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* Prishibeyev—a character in Chekhov's *Sergeant Prishibeyev*.—*Ed.*

was touched by the angelic voices of Pavel Yegorovich's children, while the children themselves felt like little convicts. He felt the falsity of his father's and uncle's proneness to facile enthusiasm. He began early to understand that there were not the slightest grounds for enthusiasm in the life around him. Every minute of this life people were insulted and humiliated, children maltreated, customers swindled and sold short measure, the swindle being accompanied by a subservient or insolent smile. Chekhov learned early to understand that this life could only be kept together by falsehood. And he learned with ever-increasing thoroughness to detest all these manifestations of falsity, including the falsity of enthusiasm, adornment, and the vulgar sentimentality, which concealed the coarseness and cruelty of actual human relations. In all this he sensed the psychology of slavery.

And the school was an even stronger foe to his liberty than the tyranny of home. The Taganrog high school was ideal from the point of view of the tsarist Ministry of Education. It was a veritable factory for turning out slaves.

Everyone knows Chekhov's "man in the shell," the school-teacher Belikov. "The men in the shell" held the Taganrog high school in their hands. One of them, Inspector Dyakonov, served Chekhov to a certain extent as a model for the teacher Belikov.

Alexander Chekhov writes in his memoirs: "Many of my contemporaries left the high school with bitterness in their souls. I myself used to dream at nights, till I was nearly fifty, of the terrible examinations, the headmaster's savage wiggings and the nagging of the teachers. I never knew a single happy day at school." In a letter written in 1886, Anton Pavlovich says: "I still dream of my school days sometimes—of not knowing my lesson, and the terror that the teacher will call me out...."

The high school must in very truth have been a form of prison, since the nightmare of it lasted so long and was felt so keenly.

Reality, endeavouring to make a slave of him, closed in on Chekhov on all sides; violence closed in upon him from every direction, as if the hospital attendant in *Ward No. 6*, the servile, obtuse instrument of execution Nikita—whose name is Legion—was approaching him with raised fists. But the more violent the pressure of reality, the more intent, aware and persevering became the young Chekhov in the defence of his human dignity.

INKLINGS OF TALENT

From his very childhood and early adolescence, Anton unconsciously used his sense of humour as a defence against all that was sad and gloomy.

The sense of humour of the youthful Chekhov brothers was astonishingly keen, and—for all its subtlety and audacity—good-natured, coloured by the love of life and human beings. Their jokes, witticisms and mischievous pranks were shot through with the play of their juvenile but maturing creative powers, and the joyful inklings of talent. Despite the blows they had to endure from the leaden fist of reality, they entered upon life trustfully, with a smile, as if they thought life powerless to overcome laughter, joy, and light. The Chekhov brothers were remarkable for their vivacity, despite the shop, school, church choir, chastisements—despite everything. They revenged themselves for the hardness of life by laughing at it.

The little Anton was an adept at the impromptu. Almost all his sallies were comic. He could change his appearance and voice with lightning rapidity, impersonating in turn a dentist, a monk, an old professor giving a lecture. He was particularly fond of pretending to sit for examination as a deacon. The role of the bishop examining the candidate for deacon's orders was taken by Alexander. "Craning his neck," relates Anton's brother

Mikhail, "which immediately seemed to be creased with elderly wrinkles, and changing the expression of his face till he became quite unrecognizable, Anton Pavlovich, in an aged, tremulous voice, was supposed to sing his brother all the eight parts of the church canons, while shaking in his shoes before the bishop, making constant blunders, and nevertheless ultimately made happy by the episcopal: 'Thou art a deacon.' "

What their pious father thought of such scenes is not known; it is to be supposed that he did not know of them. Thus it was that the Chekhov brothers "avenged themselves" in the only way then open to them for the tortures of prayers in church and at home, for the hypocrisy, the hard labour.

Anton was also fond of impersonating the Governor of the town during a "Tsar's Day" celebration in the church. He displayed the official's self-satisfaction, imbecile blissfulness, and air of strutting importance with inimitable skill.

Another impersonation of his was the important official dancing a quadrille at a ball. How many "important officials," with their neatly trimmed moustaches, servile countenances and cowardly sanctimoniousness, were later to appear in the stories of Chekhov. "Dental Surgery," in which Anton took the part of the dentist, armed with the coal-tongs, and, after prolonged torments, extracted a cork from the mouth of the "patient" (Alexander), which he exhibited triumphantly to his audience, who were doubled up with laughter, may be recognized as a rough draft for the famous Chekhov story *Surgery*.

Anton was a skilled make-up artist. One day he went, disguised as a beggar, to the house of his uncle Mitrofan Yegorovich, bearing a plaintive letter of his own composition. The uncle, who did not recognize his nephew, was moved to compassion and gave him alms. It is a pity the

letter has not come down to us—Anton must have found the key to his uncle's heart in writing it. It was the first fee he had ever received and he earned it—both as actor and author.

These were all theatrical masks, mere acting, into which the brothers put their whole energy. They were performing for their own entertainment. But a permanent theatre for their sole benefit was not enough, and they sighed, especially Anton, for a real theatre, in which they could act in real plays. The theatre was the greatest passion known to Chekhov in his childhood and adolescent years.

High-school boys were not allowed to go to the theatre without written permission from the school authorities. Inspector Dyakonov often refused this permission; he did not like a given play, he considered it dangerous for the young, and piously hoped that "no evil would come of it."

But Anton went to the theatre even without permission. He sometimes even made up his face, so that nobody should know he was a schoolboy. He went to watch actors as an actor himself.

Anton could no longer live without the theatre and its interests. He went to the theatre for the first time when he was thirteen, seeing a performance of the operetta *Helen the Beautiful*. Later he saw *Hamlet*, the plays of Ostrovsky, and a stage version of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

The first play in which Anton himself acted as a boy was Gogol's *Inspector-General*. It was an amateur performance got up by the Chekhov brothers and their friends. Anton took the part of the Governor of the town. The success of this performance emboldened the youthful actors. They organized a "real," permanent theatre at the home of Drossi, a schoolfellow, with a hall and dressing-rooms for the actors and plenty of stage properties and costumes.

The theatre was for Anton Pavlovich the first love of an artist. All through his life he kept returning to his first love, though he often vowed that he would never write plays. The first of Chekhov's youthful works known to us was written for the theatre. This was a play called *Fatherless.*

His first experiments in literature were made in his period of enthusiasm for the theatre. While still in the fourth form Chekhov contributed to a magazine which came out in manuscript under the editorship of a pupil in one of the higher classes.

In 1875 the older brothers went to Moscow and became students—Alexander of the University, and Nikolai of the School of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture. Their departure was an important event in the life of Anton. A deep, firm friendship existed between the brothers. Afraid of displaying sentimentality, of which Anton in particular was the sworn foe, they expressed their tender affection for one another by light mockery, friendly derision. But love cannot be hid, and it shows through every word of their correspondence, can be felt in their ever-present solicitude for one another, in the depth of the mutual understanding which existed among them. No one could replace for Anton his elder brothers in regard to what is so important for every artist, and especially for a nascent artist. This is the artistic sympathy which creates that radiant, much to be desired atmosphere in which not a single lucky hit, good joke, or spirited analogy is lost, or is suspended in space, uncomprehended and unwanted.

The Chekhov brothers knew how to create an atmosphere of talent. All three of them had the delightful quality of being able to take a joke. And Anton Pavlovich always rated this faculty high among human qualities. The writer Ivan Bunin recalled that Chekhov "set a great value on this talent, the talent to perpetrate a joke, and

highly appreciated those who saw the point of a joke immediately.

"Oh, yes, that's the surest of signs. If a person can't take a joke, you can write him off as no good. And even if such a one is a paragon of wisdom, he cannot have a real mind."

Anton missed his brothers sorely. He was so used to their company, to daily contacts with them, that he began to write a comic sheet for them, which he called *The Stammerer* and sent to them regularly in Moscow. Unfortunately not a single issue of *The Stammerer* has come down to us. Alexander, then an infallible authority for Anton on literary questions, encouraged his younger brother. And so even in those early years humour played an enormous part in the life of the future brilliant humourist and satirist. The youthful Chekhov, at first unconsciously, laid bare the ridiculous, pitiful elements underlying his most terrible foes—tyranny, servility, falsity, vulgarity, cant—and these foes ceased to appear invincible.

"GOOD-BYE, HOME! GOOD-BYE TO THE OLD LIFE!"

An inner process of vast, indeed decisive significance for his whole life was going on in the young Anton's soul. He read much and thought much. He was a gay and friendly companion, but a profoundly independent individual, jealously protecting his independence from the interference of others. Liberty! In this word may be summed up all the aspirations of the youthful Chekhov. In his aspirations for liberty his grandfather had laid away tiny sums, year after year, towards the purchase of his freedom. The same aspirations had made his father save his money from day to day, from year to year, so as to be able to have an "independent" business of his own. But the young Anton could see that neither his father nor his uncle had become free men; he could see the roots slavery had struck in their souls; he early realized that those slavish qualities, lack of respect for others and for human dignity, were what underlay their tyrannical ways. Liberty meant something else for Anton Chekhov. It meant freedom from the habits, feelings, principles and traditions of middle-class vulgarity, servitude, proprietary instincts, from all that had been grafted upon one generation after another and seemed to have entered the very blood stream of human beings.

The ideal of liberty and the free individual matured gradually in the soul of the young Chekhov.

The years from 1876 to 1879, when he remained behind in Taganrog, were of great importance for his latent spiritual forces. His mother, Yevgenya Yakovlevna, soon followed her husband to Moscow with her younger children, Mikhail and Masha, and a short time after, Anton's brother Ivan went away too. The Chekhovs' entire life underwent an abrupt change. From having been a prosperous family they became an impoverished one. In Moscow they slept side by side on the damp floor. Moreover, they came to know the treachery of friends. Their Taganrog lodger, a certain Selivanov, a Commercial Court official and a gambler, promised to deliver the family from their misfortunes and redeem the promissory note held against Pavel Yegorovich. He did redeem it, but at the same time he made the Chekhov house his property.

The theme of bidding farewell to one's home, recurring so frequently in the works of Chekhov, is undoubtedly associated with the impressions received in youth. The wrench with his earliest home was for Anton Chekhov one of those grim experiences which remain engraved for life on the memory.

The critic A. Roskin, in his book *Antosha Chekhontey*, notes that Chekhov's story *Other People's Misfortunes*, depicting an impoverished family compelled to sell their estate, is in reality a description of the Chekhov house in Taganrog. The first thing that struck the eyes of the new owners when they took over the estate, in *Other People's Misfortunes*, were "... the traces left by the former tenants —a school timetable copied out in a childish hand, a headless doll, a chaffinch flying to the window for crumbs, an inscription on the wall: 'Natasha is a Silly,' etc. It would take a lot of painting, papering and carpentering before other people's misfortunes were forgotten."

As always in Chekhov's stories the smallest details convey an infinity of meaning. The chaffinch, whom

nobody wanted now but who still flew up for its accustomed alms, gives an instantaneous picture of the destruction of a whole way of life, now gone from the estate —an alien life, which had once seemed so natural, so solid. And all the other details are particles of this vanished life which had once been so vivid, so eager, and had become cold, lifeless, unwanted, absurd.

Gloomy as childhood had been, still there were parts of it dear to the heart left behind in the Taganrog house. Selivanov, the new owner, would have to do "a lot of painting, papering and carpentering before other people's misfortunes were forgotten."

Anton had to go on living in a house which was all the more alien for having once been his home. The new owner offered him a corner to live in in exchange for giving his nephew lessons. Chekhov thought the offer over and accepted it. There was nowhere else for him to go.

His memories of the experience were, however, coloured by something more than mere grief at the break with the old life, with his home, and his childhood. There was something akin to the joys of freedom in his feelings, something like what the young girl Anya, the heroine of Chekhov's *Cherry Orchard*, felt in bidding farewell to her childhood, to the familiar cherry orchard, to the whole of her former life: "Good-bye, home! Good-bye to the old life!" The joy of bidding farewell to the old plays a much greater part in the works of Chekhov than the grief of parting, of which former biographers have made so much.

The dream of escaping from the tyrannical power of his father, from the hated, finally bankrupt shop, from the whole suffocating life of the family, had come true. Liberty had come in unexpected guise, by way of grief, catastrophe, injury, humiliations, and poverty. But still, it was liberty.

The difficulties of a new, adult life now confronted Chekhov, and he coped with them manfully. Anton, a six-

teen-year-old boy from an impoverished family, whose misfortunes, including the flight of the head of the family from his creditors, had become the butt of Taganrog wags, bore himself with irreproachable dignity. And in this lay the secret of his getting the upper hand in his dealings with Selivanov—in his calm, firm, but not defiant independence. Selivanov himself could not have dreamed of treating this lightly mocking, but courteous and even-tempered youth disrespectfully. He very soon began to regard the schoolboy coach as an equal, and to call him respectfully by his name and patronymic—Anton Pavlovich.

Very little is known to biographers of the independent period of Chekhov's life in Taganrog. One thing, however, is certain, and that is that they were years devoted to perfectly conscious self-improvement. A letter dated April 1879 from the nineteen-year-old Anton to his fourteen-year-old brother Mikhail, makes this quite clear:

"Dear brother Misha,

"Your letter arrived when I was in the throes of the most appalling boredom, standing at the gate and yawning, so you may judge how welcome your enormous epistle was. Your handwriting is good and I didn't find a single grammar mistake in the whole letter. There's one thing I don't like—why do you sign yourself 'Your insignificant nonentity of a brother'? So you consider yourself a nonentity? Everybody can't be the same, Brother Misha. You must learn to maintain your dignity among people. You're an honest person, aren't you—not a rogue? Very well, then, respect yourself as an honest fellow, and know that an honest fellow is no nonentity. You must not confuse due modesty with the consciousness of your own worthlessness."

These lines were written by a youth who had been constantly beaten and thrashed, brought up in servile submission to authority of any sort, to anyone who was ever so little stronger or richer than himself. What a mature understanding of human dignity he had managed to cultivate! We shall see that this process of squeezing out the slave drop by drop, about which Anton Pavlovich was afterwards to write in one of his most significant letters, began very early. By the age of nineteen he appears as a pedagogue, endeavouring to inculcate in the soul of his younger brother, too, aspirations—the struggle against slavish traits.

And so Chekhov, the future artist for whom the struggle for human dignity was the underlying motive of all his work, gradually came into being.

Accustomed to protect his independence, his inner freedom against encroachment, he formed no intimacies in his youth, though he was always a splendid comrade, ready to make any sacrifices in the name of friendship. Anything which seemed to him like an attempt on his freedom aroused his suspicions and put him on the alert. This attitude characterized him to the end of his days. Even as a young man he desired to get at the root of things by his own, unaided efforts. In his early youth he defended his independence with almost morbid intensity. The suppression of his personal freedom, both at home and at school, had caused him so much suffering!

Chekhov was stirred both by moral and aesthetic problems. He deliberately drew up a code of morals for himself. The young Anton took little interest in politics as such. Prolonged sojourn in Taganrog, a remote town which had lost its former economic significance, vulgar middle-class surroundings, the lack of common roots with his contemporaries—all this did nothing to facilitate the development of political interests in a youth from a family of tradesmen and shop assistants.

Political apathy showed itself in Chekhov even at a later age, when his atheism and materialism had already developed.

The roots of this political apathy must be sought, among other things, in the conditions and atmosphere which went to form his individuality during his adolescence and early manhood. Ultimately it was the influence of that very vulgarity, which Chekhov learned so early to detest, that made itself felt. The enemy proved to be both tough and wily, assuming all sorts of forms, even the form of spiritual independence. The seventies were, or course, anything but a time of political apathy in Russia. Narodism* was still a revolutionary movement; it only began to show liberalist-kulak tendencies after the murder of Tsar Alexander II, in 1881. But Chekhov was not carried away by the revolutionary spirit either in his school or college days. In the seventies he had not yet begun to take an interest in politics, and in the eighties, as we shall see, new and complex factors sprang up, which did not facilitate the growth in Chekhov of an active interest in political questions as such. His ethical code was, however, influenced by democratism, and by advanced Russian literature, especially Shchedrin and Turgenev, as well as by his detestation of middle-class vulgarity, all of which later on helped in the gradual, slow and painful process of weaning him from his a-political tendencies.

The chief spiritual traits of the nineteen-year-old youth were depth of character, courage, and a mature clarity with regard to moral questions. In the letter to his brother Mikhail already quoted, we find the following lines:

"I'm very glad to hear you are reading. Get into the

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* Narodism—petty-bourgeois tendency in the Russian revolutionary movement which made itself felt between the sixties and seventies of the last century.—*Ed.*

habit of reading. In time you will be glad of this habit. So Madame Beecher Stowe wrung tears from your eyes? I read her book some time ago, and six months ago reread it from the scientific point of view and was left with the unpleasant sensation we mortals have after eating too many raisins or currants.... I advise you to read these books: *Don Quixote* (in the complete edition—7 or 8 parts). A fine book. This is a work of Cervantes who is regarded as almost on a level with Shakespeare. I advise my brothers, if they haven't done so already, to read also Turgenev's *Don Quixote and Hamlet*. You won't understand it, Brother. If you want to read a travel book that isn't boring, try Goncharov's *Frigate Pallada*."

Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, in spite of the loftiest intentions on the part of the author, while of undoubted significance in the struggle for the emancipation of the Negroes, is saturated with sentimentality. The book is coloured by compassion for "these little ones," and not by the courageous struggle for dignity and freedom. It was this that evoked an ironical attitude in Chekhov and that seemed to him sugary stuff. In his letter he comes forward as the moral and aesthetic mentor of his brother.

The youthful Anton was burdened with innumerable cares. Not only did he have to earn his living and pay for his schooling, but he had also to help his family, who were living in a welter of poverty in Moscow. It was the thought of his mother's sufferings which weighed on him most of all. His brother Alexander wrote to him: "Our mother is wasting away like a candle from day to day. Our sister is very ill, too, and has to keep her bed. My own grief you will be able to understand, I think."

Anton sold the remnants of the household belongings, ran about giving private lessons, and sent money to Moscow. He became familiar with humiliating months

of waiting for his miserable fee, with the oblique glances of employers at the coach's ragged boots, with agonizing longings for a glass of sweetened tea, which was sometimes offered, sometimes withheld.

There was certainly nothing very invigorating in all this, or in the haunting thoughts of the family's poverty. Anton did his best to cheer his father and mother, joked in his letters, but only managed to hurt his mother's feelings.

"We have had two letters from you," she wrote to her son, "full of jokes, and all we had in the house at the time was four kopeks for bread and lamp-oil, and we thought perhaps you would send us some money, and it is very hard to think you and Ivan don't believe us; Masha has no winter coat, and I have no boots, so we have to stay at home. . . ."

Of course Anton believed, how could he help it! For a long time his father was unable to find work. Alexander helped them, but that was not much. It was practically impossible to expect any help from Nikolai.

"Nikolai has plenty of orders," wrote the mother to Anton. "He could make a lot, but he has no time, goes visiting almost every day, and has hardly painted a single picture the whole winter."

Alexander and Nikolai, too, now students, were revelling in their freedom. But this freedom, alas, was of a very dubious sort. Like Anton, the elder brothers wished to shake off the vulgar associations of Taganrog, and began early to rebel against their father's tyranny. The word "Taganrog" was for them a symbol of the suppression of their own will, and they wanted to do just what they liked. "Taganrog" was bound up with despotism and compulsory labour, and so it seemed to them that voluntary labour, inspiration, were incompatible with a strict, regular regime and iron discipline. For Nikolai, and to a certain extent for Alexander too, to be free meant to go

against "Taganrog" in every way. But Bohemianism is only another aspect of vulgarity.

When his mother whote regretfully in a letter to Anton that "Nikolai goes visiting every day," she implied much that was bitter to the maternal heart. Both Nikolai and Alexander were heavy drinkers, constantly losing all semblance of humanity in a drunken stupor. Both gradually became dipsomaniacs.

The mother awaited the arrival of her favourite, Anton, with hope and with fear.

"I pray to God every day that you will soon come, but Father says, when Anton comes he'll go visiting too and do nothing, but Fenichka says you're a stay-at-home and you love work, and I don't know which of them is right. . . .

"Finish up with your school work at Taganrog as quick as you can, and come here as quick as you can, oh, do, I am so tired of waiting for you and mind you go into the medical faculty, we don't like Alexander's work, send us the icons a few at a time and, Anton, I want to tell you if you are a good worker you'll always find something to do in Moscow and be able to earn money.

"I can't help thinking it will be better for me when you come."

Something told her that Anton could be relied on. But Pavel Yegorovich no longer expected any good of his sons. He had found work at last in the office of a merchant called Gavrilov, and now lived in Zamoskvorechye with the rest of the Gavrilov shopmen, visiting his family on holidays. Pavel Yegorovich only received thirty rubles a month, and his wife made a little now and then by work on her sewing machine.

HEAD OF THE FAMILY

After graduating from high school Anton spent the whole summer in Taganrog, trying to obtain for himself the stipend paid by the municipal authorities to a Taganrog boy while at college. This stipend amounted to twenty-five rubles a month. Anton was given it for four months ahead, so that he had a whole hundred rubles at his disposal. In addition to this he was able to help his family by bringing with him two boarders. So his arrival brought about an improvement in the situation of the family. Soon another boarder came to them. The Chekhovs moved to a five-room flat in another house in the same street.

Anton at almost one and the same time enrolled himself as a medical student and became a contributor to comic papers. And a life filled with incessant toil immediately became the order of the day.

The medical faculty was considered one of the most difficult in the University, demanding a great deal of work from the students, in which it differed from other departments—the law department, for instance, the students of which were jestingly called "idlers." Anton Pavlovich loved medical science and revered the professors, who at that time included such famous names as Zakharyin and Sklifosovsky, the pride of Russian science. Chekhov studied conscientiously, but it was hard for him to combine his studies with his work on comic papers.

His contributions to comic papers soon became the principal source of the family's means of subsistence. While still in Taganrog, Anton had got into the habit of sending all sorts of trifles—jokes, funny stories, and so on—for his brother Alexander to pass judgement on and send to editors. Alexander Pavlovich was already a promising writer. He signed the stories he got printed in the comic press by various pseudonyms, principally "Agafopod Yedinitsin." He got the scraps sent him by Anton placed in magazines, gave him advice, recommended books to him. Anton sent his first serious literary experiment—the play *Fatherless*—to his elder brother, in fear and trembling, and the latter tore it to shreds with his devastating criticism. When Anton Pavlovich settled in Moscow, Alexander at first helped him to get his work into the Moscow magazines. Anton wrote over a number of pseudonyms, sometimes even signing himself "My brother's brother," thus emphasizing the secondary role of Antosha in comparison with that played by Alexander. His favourite *nom de plume*, however, was "Antosha Chekhontey," a nickname given him by the waggish Catechism teacher at the Taganrog high school.

Stories signed by Antosha Chekhontey were becoming more and more popular and editors vied with one another for his contributions. Now it was Anton who helped Alexander. And the brothers exchanged roles in a deeper sense. The day came when Alexander was obliged, with feelings of melancholy and of pride in his younger brother's talent, to acknowledge his superiority, both literary and moral.

Almost imperceptibly the nineteen-year-old Anton rose to the position of the head of the family, its main support and adviser.

All her life his mother was fond of remembering and recounting how her Antosha had become the head of the family.

"I liked to sit in her room, listening to her reminiscences," says the writer Tatyana Shchepkina-Kupernik. "They almost all led to something about Anton.

"She would recall with loving admiration the unforgettable moment when Anton, still quite a young student, came to her and said: 'Well, Mamma, from now on I will pay for Masha's schooling myself!' (Up till then her school fees had been paid by well-wishers.)

" 'And ever since, things began to go well,' the old woman would say. 'His first thought was always to pay for everything himself, to earn enough for all. And how his eyes shone when he said: "*I'll* pay for it, Mamma!" '

"And when she said that her own eyes would shine, and the tiny smile-wrinkles which make the Chekhov smile so delightful would gather at the corners of her eyes. Anton Pavlovich and Marya Pavlovna inherited this smile from her."

Yes, he became the mentor of the entire family; even his father fell unconsciously under the moral influence of the youthful student.

Pavel Yegorovich was, as we know, as hard as a flint. At first his attitude both to the young Anton and to his brothers Alexander and Nikolai was tinged with irony, and he endeavoured to set up the old Taganrog routine. His position, it is true, was somewhat weakened now, if only because the care of maintaining the family had been imposed upon Anton. Without the slightest fuss, Anton consistently, from day to day, waged a campaign against all the habits and traditions of Taganrog. He was just as firm and inexorable in this as his father himself had once been in his system of education.

"Anton's will became the dominant one," remembered Mikhail Pavlovich. "Harsh, laconic remarks, hitherto unknown to me, became the order of the day in our family: 'That's not true,' 'We must be fair,' 'Don't tell lies,' and so on."

Chekhov imbues all his favourite heroes with his own hatred of lying. The slightest deviation from truth, the faintest tinge of falsehood, causes them as much suffering as acute physical pain.

"The plant-louse eats grass, rust eats iron, and lies eat the soul"—these words of the old house-painter in Chekhov's story *My Life* describe the main features which go to make up Chekhov's favourite heroes in his own works. Abhorrence of lying was also a characteristic trait of Chekhov himself. "He who lies is unclean," we read in one of his notebooks.

All unconsciously, without, as yet, the slightest thought of becoming a real writer, the young Chekhov waged a struggle for his talent, for his right to create, ruthlessly destroying all that was slavish in the souls of himself and those dear to him. At the time this was a struggle for his own individuality. When the question of his individuality as a writer arose it became perfectly clear to him that the cultivation in himself of the individual and of the artist were but two halves of a single unit.

To re-educate his father, Pavel Yegorovich, with his flinty temperament—there would be a victory! Of course the old man could not be transformed into another person. But the very fact that he began to be ashamed of his past, of his tyranny, testified to the great pedagogical talent of the young Chekhov. The letter to his brother Alexander in which Anton begs him to remember the "horror and disgust" they had felt "when Father made a row at the dinner-table because the soup was oversalted, or called Mother a fool," includes the apparently casual remark: "Our Father can never forgive himself for all that now." Anton Pavlovich does not go on to explain whose influence it was that produced such a change in the views of Pavel Yegorovich. But Alexander could read between the lines Anton's pride in having brought about, by his

tactful but inexorable firmness, a veritable revolution in the consciousness of one so old, so intolerant, so arbitrary, of one brought up in the traditions of serfdom, combined with merchant-class tyranny.

The spiritual efforts that all this cost Anton Pavlovich, the self-control it imposed upon him, may be judged from an admission he made in a letter to his wife, Olga Leonardovna Knipper-Chekhova, an actress in the Moscow Art Theatre: "You say you envy my disposition. I must tell you that by nature I am harsh, hot-tempered, etc. But I have learned to control myself, for a decent person cannot let himself go. I used to behave badly enough, God knows! Don't forget my grandfather was a rabid advocate of serfdom."

One can never cease wondering at this admission. The image of the tactful, gentle, intuitive and modest "Dr. Chekhov" is so firmly engraved on everyone's mind that it seems impossible to imagine him harsh, hot-tempered, and "behaving badly." But he never used words lightly—if he said he used to be like that we are bound to believe him. The more that, as we know, harshness and hot-temper were Chekhov family traits. It is of course possible that, in his exactingness towards himself, he judged himself too severely. But there can be no doubt that his disposition was formed by stubborn self-discipline, beginning in his early, youthful years.

It is noteworthy that the story *Difficult People*, describing a quarrel of appalling violence between father and son, had at first a different ending, subsequently rejected by the author. According to the first version the quarrellers came to a reconciliation. And the son wonders: "How is it that everything in nature has its price? Even humane feelings, gentleness and a kind disposition are only attained by means of sacrifice and hard lessons."

There is much in this thought that applies to the author himself.

Those who took the gentleness of Chekhov for weakness were greatly mistaken; beneath this gentleness was concealed the strength of one who had learned to come out a victor in the struggle with a dangerous foe—himself.

This is corroborated by the authors of Chekhov memoirs. Chekhov's Petersburg friend, the writer I. Shcheglov, speaks of the change that seemed to have come over Anton Chekhov's spiritual being: "He seemed to have become another man. During the first period of high-spirited youth and unremitting success, Chekhov 'now and then' revealed certain irritating traits—a kind of frivolous college-boy arrogance and even, one might say, rudeness. . . .

"He became more thoughtful, deeper in his writings, and more considerate, more tactful in his speech, much more reserved in his attitude to others."

The writer I. Potapenko, who knew Chekhov well, states: "My memory retains several written reminiscences of Chekhov, undoubtedly dictated by the best intentions and feelings. And those who see Anton Pavlovich in the light of these reminiscences cannot fail to form a picture of an individual apparently not made of flesh and blood, a kind of saint, who has renounced all human weaknesses, a man without passions, errors, foibles.

". . . No, Chekhov was neither an angel nor a saint, but a human being in the true sense of the word. And the evenness of character and steadiness which astonished all in him were the result of agonizing inner struggles, were hard-won trophies. The artist in him was on his side in this struggle, demanding all his time and all his energy, and everyday life surrendered nothing without a struggle.

". . . There are fortunate persons with remarkable bodily symmetry. Everything about them is ideally proportioned. Such bodies make an impression of entrancing beauty.

"Chekhov's soul was like this. There was everything in it—virtue and failings. If it had contained nothing but good qualities it would have been one-sided, just as a soul consisting of nothing but vices would be.

"As a matter of fact generosity and modesty dwelt in Chekhov side by side with pride and ambition, and a sense of justice had bias for its neighbour. But, like a true sage, he knew how to rule his failings, so that they acquired the nature of virtues."

In the language of our own day we may say that Chekhov did not separate the personal from the general. His struggle for the eradication of vulgarity in himself, in his family, in his personal life, found an echo in his struggle against all that lowers human dignity.

The "revolt" of Anton Chekhov was no mere bravado, but an incessant struggle against the ways of the middle-class world, at first within his own family circle, but very soon in his literary work.

Looking after the family demanded much strength and labour.

The nineteen-year-old youth thoroughly realized that he was the sole support of the family, that all the responsibility, both material and moral, lay on his shoulders. He was as yet far from giving up hope for Alexander and Nikolai as talented men, marked out for serious work. Many years of struggle for their talent, for their dignity as human beings, of struggle against their own weaknesses, still lay ahead of him. But something told him, even then, that he must be the one to think of the whole family, must secure peace of mind for his father, freeing the old man from his humiliating employment in the service of the merchant Gavrilov, must secure rest for his mother, pay for the schooling of Marya and Mikhail, struggle for his older brothers.

He shouldered these responsibilities without the slightest tinge of resentment, without regret for his youth,

devoured by daily cares. He retained his high spirits. There was much of Pushkin's bright spirit about the disposition of the young Chekhov. He loved carefree gaiety, friendship. "I love all sorts of festivities," wrote the seventeen-year-old Anton to his cousin in Kaluga, "Russian merry-making, with dancing and singing and drinking." His "drinking" never took on the unbridled, dangerous character it assumed in his elder brothers. In everything he aspired towards refinement. He was fond of a choral song at a convivial board, and of the company of "tender maidens and youthful matrons." He loved long, aimless walks. Nature aroused in him a joyful rallying of all his forces. His outlook was broad, and he viewed life with all the freshness of youth. The words: "Made for happiness" seem to apply to no other writer so aptly as to the young Pushkin and the young Chekhov. Chekhov was destined to treat of the renunciation of personal happiness more profoundly than any other Russian writer. But this theme, like all the great Chekhov themes, was still veiled in the mists of the future.

His cares for the family led to a spate of writing: payment was wretched, circumstances forced him to produce as much as possible, to write incessantly, untiringly, without respite. Exhausting overproduction is a dangerous foe to young talent, only just beginning to mature. It has drained the resources of many a writer.

Another danger was the fact that Chekhov did not at first attribute any real significance to his literary work, ranking it a great deal lower than his medical and scientific interests.

There were, however, still greater dangers threatening his talent. These dangers were inherent in the prevailing conditions of the era, and the nature of the comic papers in which Chekhov was destined to start upon his literary path.

IN THOSE FAR-OFF, REMOTE TIMES....

The eighties have gone down in the history of Russia as a period of social stagnation, of the coarse, cynical triumph of reaction. It was a time of transition, when Narodism had suffered final defeat, and Marxism and the revolutionary movement of the working class were maturing in the profound depths of the epoch.

Nothing had come of all the efforts of the Narodniks to get a following among the peasants, since they did not really know or understand what the life and interests of the peasants were. Equally doomed to failure were their attempts to stand alone, unsupported by the people, in their fight against the autocracy. On the first of March, 1881, a member of the People's Will assassinated Alexander II. This event marked the end of revolutionary Narodism. A period of degeneration set in for Narodism, which dwindled down into a mere manifestation of the commonplace liberal adaptation to facts. The reaction exploited the assassination of the tsar for the establishment of a reign of terror throughout the country. The ominous figure of Pobedonostsev, the embodiment of the blood-thirsty dictatorship of the landed proprietors, of the suppression of all public opinion whatsoever, of loathsome hypocrisy, ruled the country under Alexander III.

After the execution of the leaders of the People's Will and the subsequent failure of the attempt on the life of Alexander III, made under the auspices of the group to

which Alexander Ulyanov (Lenin's brother) belonged, the reactionary terror became still more savage.

"They are afraid to speak loudly, to write letters, to make friends, read books, help the poor, teach the illiterate"—this is how Chekhov, in *The Man in the Shell*, later described life in Pobedonostsev's Russia.

The eighties were, of course, not merely a time of social stagnation. Lenin compared them to a prison. And yet Lenin himself has pointed out that "there was never a historical era in Russia of which it could have been so truly said that 'the turn of thought and reason has come,' as of the era of Alexander III.... It was a time of intensive work on the part of the Russian revolutionary thinkers who created the foundations for the Social-Democratic outlook. We revolutionaries would not dream of denying the revolutionary role of reactionary periods. We know that the form of social movement changes, that periods in which the masses display actual political creativeness are followed in history by periods of external calm, while the masses, oppressed and crushed by unceasing toil and deprivation, are either silent or sleeping (the latter more likely), labour processes are being rapidly transformed, and the progressive representatives of the human mind are summarizing the lessons of the past and constructing new systems and methods of research.... In a word, 'the turn of thought and reason' sometimes has as much influence on a historical period as the time spent in prison by a revolutionary has on his scientific work and study."

Advanced public opinion, science and art in Russia were much enriched in the eighties.

In 1883 the first Marxist group—the famous "Emancipation of Labour" group—was organized in Russia. Plekhanov was writing his philosophical works. Such products of the era as the works of Mendeleyev, Timiryazev, the paintings of Surikov and Repin—brilliant creations of

Russian art, the immortal compositions of Chaikovsky and Rimsky-Korsakov, could not but influence the spiritual development of Chekhov. They all helped to compose the true essence of the era which nursed Chekhov.

On the surface of political life, however, all appeared drowsy, sombre, hopeless, especially for representatives of the younger generation of the middle-class intellectuals like Chekhov, "disillusioned" in politics before they had had time to form any political illusions.

Chekhov embarked upon his literary career at a time when the press laboured under unprecedented difficulties.

To Pobedonostsev, the suppression of the press and the utter "prohibition" of public opinion were almost his principal tasks. He aimed, in the words of his political friend, the reactionary journalist K. Leontyev, to "freeze" Russia. He set about the suppression of the press with the "firm" hand of a canting fanatic and sworn foe to Russian culture. One of his crimes against Russian culture was the closing down of the famous *Otechestvenniye Zapiski* (*Fatherland Notes*), a progressive magazine edited by Saltykov-Shchedrin.

The sixties, when the revolutionary-democratic movement was at its peak in Russia, when such organs of Russian revolutionary-democratic thought as the *Sovremennik* (*Contemporary*) and its satirical supplement *Iskra* (*The Spark*) came out—continually hounded by the censor as they were—began to seem a far-off, almost mythical time. Pobedonostsev changed the face of the Russian press. Only timid, moderate liberal and liberal-popular publications, grovelling papers like Suvorin's *Novoye Vremya* (*New Times*), and Black-Hundred reactionary leaflets, could keep their heads above water.

THE DANCE OF THE "DRAGON-FLIES"

The remarkable prosperity enjoyed by the minor comic papers was a true sign of the times. They bred and multiplied with astonishing rapidity in Moscow and Petersburg. They bore such names as *Strekoza* (*The Dragon-Fly*), *Oskolki* (*Fragments*), *Budilnik* (*The Alarm-Clock*), *Razvlecheniye* (*Amusement*), *Zritel* (*The Spectator*), and there were innumerable others, mainly differing from one another only in their names.

The nature of these weekly papers and the space at their command demanded diminutive contributions, brief, caustic texts to go under caricatures, anecdotes of not more than ten lines, two-line dialogues, the tiniest of stories and playlets.

The censor hunted down the most ordinary "liberal" fooling. All these papers were forced to ring the changes on drunken merchants, caricaturing *ad nauseam* their jargon, on middle-class weddings, meek husbands, frivolous wives, "my friend the fireman," dressy ladies and dandies.

The heroes of the short stories, playlets, the subjects of the caricatures printed in the comic papers were townsfolk—salesmen, petty officials, employees, commercial travellers, clerks, postmen, cashiers, lawyers, doctors, artists, actors, teachers, and so on.

The abundance of small comic papers is to be explained, on the one hand, by the Pobedonostsev policy of the

muzzling and prohibition of a serious public press. On the other hand, the increasing importance of cities in the life of the country, keeping pace with the rapid process of its capitalist development, was an undoubted factor. The middle-class urban population was steadily growing, a new class of intellectuals, the so-called *raznochintsy*, the plebeian intellectuals, had come into being and its representatives had been depicted in such famous Russian literary productions as Gogol's *Overcoat*, Dostoyevsky's *Poor Folk*, *The Injured and the Insulted*, *Crime and Punishment*, Pomyalovsky's narratives and Garshin's stories.

But the democratic and progressive literature which should take the ordinary professional man for its hero had not yet come into its own. Pomyalovsky in the sixties and Garshin in the eighties were its talented representatives, but they were unable as yet to raise this literature to the level of a great art. Pomyalovsky, driven to desperation by the savage reaction, drank himself to death at the age of twenty-eight. Garshin, with his quivering conscience, morbidly sensitive, brittle spiritual constitution, was unable to endure the pressure of the Pobedonostsev era. He grew psychically unstable, became a mental case and committed suicide, throwing himself down a flight of stairs. He did not leave much behind him, having only lived to the age of thirty-three.

A new reader, springing from the masses, was thirsting for a literature of his own, which should help him to find his way in life. For this, the reader was offered the works of writers like Shcheglov, Barantsevich, and other contemporaries of Chekhov, depicting the life of this new reader in a vulgar middle-class light.

Instead of real literature, for which the democratic reader thirsted, he was offered cheap, showy little papers, on the face of it close to his demands, inasmuch as they dealt with his everyday life, but in reality a hollow

mockery of his as yet half-formed though vital needs. And yet the reader fell avidly on these papers with a vague hope of finding food for his soul, a little something for himself, under the grinning mask of imbecile, heavy-handed, trivial humour. After all, these magazines treated of the everyday life of the "common man." Though all these *Dragon-Flies* merely skimmed the surface of life with their frivolous wings, the so-called serious literature produced by the Barantseviches and Shcheglovs went no deeper.

BIRTH OF AN INNOVATOR. THE UGLY DUCKLING

It is one of the ironies of history that precisely from this backstairs of Russian journalism there emerged a dangerous foe to the Prishibeyevs and the Pobedonostsevs, a foe to what Lenin called "the old, accursed, enslaved Russia, the Russia of serfdom and autocracy," an exposer of a way of life so debasing to human beings. This foe was the powerful new Russian writer, at present concealing his identity beneath the half-comic pseudonym "Antosha Chekhontey," and still far from alive to the significance of his own work as an innovator. He took as the hero of his stories the ordinary professional man, the subordinate employee, the peasant—in a word "the little man."

When he began contributing to the comic press Chekhov had not the slightest idea of becoming an innovator. But the mysterious forces of creation, the lofty democratic ideal of truth led him imperiously forward. The amusing stories of Antosha Chekhontey were beginning to make the reader think. The reader of these stories was assailed by strange emotions. Here were to be found the same situations, the same surroundings, the same characters, even, it seemed, the same sort of humour that the reader was accustomed to find in the works of other contributors to *Budilnik* and *Oskolki*. And yet, strange to say, while they seemed just the same, they were not the same at all. Everything in the stories of Antosha

Chekhontey underwent a magical, poetical transformation. On the surface the author kept within the limits of ordinary humorous literature, adhered to the standards of entertainment. But he made of the brief story a veritable pearl of literary art. Within these limits he performed a miracle of transformation. The little comic papers became the soil for genius.

How did this extraordinary situation come about, how was this miracle accomplished?

Chekhov formed his most solid ties at the time with the Petersburg paper *Oskolki*. Its editor, Nikolai Leikin, was a picturesque figure. In his youth he had contributed during the sixties to the famous *Sovremennik* and *Iskra* with articles and stories from the lives of the urban middle class and merchants. He was well-versed in this life, having come from a family of merchants and salesmen, and having himself at one time been a salesman. He was acquainted with Nekrasov, Pomyalovsky, Reshetnikov, and Gleb Uspensky. But the tempestuous sixties had long become a legend. By the eighties Leikin was the successful owner of *Oskolki*, a magazine with a large circulation. Both in himself and in his attitude to the journalistic enterprise he headed, Leikin was a typical tradesman, resourceful and close-fisted. Instinctively aware that the unusually witty and hard-working student was a useful man, Leikin determined to get hold of him for the entire benefit of his own firm. He was always on the alert to see that Chekhov did not write for other papers, and endeavoured to get as much as possible out of this prolific contributor. He was careful not to overpay him, but gradually increased his rates, a little at a time, lest Antosha Chekhontey be tempted away by rivals.

Chekhov soon became a kind of literary navvy in the service of Leikin. Such was his almost superhuman appetite for work that there was hardly anything from which

he shrank. He wrote captions to go under caricatures, supplied endless "trifles," invented subjects for illustrations, wrote anecdotes and dialogues, composed a comic calendar, humorous "remarks of a naturalist," parodies, and undertook a section which he named "Fragments of Moscow Life." He worked for the Leikin firm for five years running. Despite Leikin's jealousy, Chekhov contributed to a number of other papers, too, and after a time began to write for the newspapers as well, among other things, law-court reports for the *Petersburg Gazette*. His productivity astonished even himself.

Many of his "trifles" in no way differed from similar, more or less amusing, contributions by other writers. The miniature stories of Antosha Chekhontey were sometimes merely extensions of the "trifles," and were based on anecdotes. It was precisely work of this sort that Leikin demanded of Chekhov. He regarded Chekhov's *Work of Art* as a pattern for contributions to *Oskolki*. "This is just the kind of story comic papers need," he wrote to the author.

The *Work of Art* was a crude story, related, of course, with the Chekhov brilliance, but still nothing but an anecdote, quite in the traditions of *Oskolki* humour. Its theme is the passing from hand to hand of a bronze candlestick, most "artistically executed" but extremely frivolous in subject. This candlestick is pressed upon a doctor by a grateful patient, who deeply regrets he had not been able to find another to match it. The doctor, a married man, not wishing to keep so dubious an object of art in his home, takes it to a comedian friend in honour of his benefit at the theatre. The comedian, moved by similar considerations of decency, sells the candlestick to a second-hand dealer, who turns out to be the patient's mother. So the patient once more goes in triumph to the doctor with the same candlestick, delighted with the idea that the doctor, as he thinks, will now have a pair. Apart

from the amusing "boomerang" motif there is nothing in the story.

But Leikin neither expected nor desired anything different from Chekhov. Not only did he grudge Antosha Chekhontey to other publications, he was suspicious of any story in which his ear detected something new, something strange, something that seemed to belong to *Oskolki* but was not quite exactly the thing. It was thus that the ducks in Hans Andersen's *Ugly Duckling* regarded the cygnet, which they considered a duck gone wrong.

Leikin desired to retard Chekhov's development, to keep the young contributor strictly within the limits of *Oskolki* humour. He never ceased hoping, as the mother-duck in the story hoped, that Antosha Chekhontey "would improve in time, and fine down." He was far from the thought that the miracle of the birth and maturing of a great writer was being accomplished so close to him.

The pressure he exerted on Chekhov was by no means harmless. He fought strenuously and officiously for the Antosha Chekhontey he could understand. It was not merely the authority of a Petersburg celebrity that he brought to bear on the young writer; he tried also to terrorize Chekhov, insinuating that Petersburg public opinion did not think much of those stories by Antosha Chekhontey which deviated from the *Oskolki* tradition.

Leikin was sometimes absurdly mistaken, taking for *Oskolki* stories of the first water, precisely those stories in which Chekhov had broken away from the *Oskolki* style.

An instance of this is Leikin's condescending praise of Chekhov's *Carelessness*, which he called a "delicious titbit," seeing in it nothing but the humorous subject.

Carelessness is characteristic from a point of view interesting to ourselves: how a great artist was born within the limits of the miniature stories of commonplace comic journalism.

The principal character in *Carelessness*, Pyotr Petrovich Strizhin, "the man whose new galoshes were stolen last year," is a widower, whose household is reigned over by an austere spinster sister-in-law. Returning home late one evening from a christening-party with a feeling that he had not been given enough to drink there, Strizhin found a bottle of kerosene in the cupboard and, taking it for vodka, drank a whole wineglassful. Realizing his mistake, he rushes into his sister-in-law's room, frantic with pain and anticipation of death, to wake her up and tell her what had happened.

"Dasha ... I—I—I've drunk kerosene!"

"Nonsense! They would never serve you kerosene."

When she discovers what had really happened, Dasha not only shows no sympathy for Strizhin's sufferings, but falls upon the unfortunate man, scolding him violently for his intention to drink vodka without her permission. Strizhin rushes from one doctor to another, but either finds none at home or is unable to rouse one. He goes to the chemist's, where the sedate, dignified chemist scolds him for troubling people in the night. Here also he finds no help. In his despair Strizhin decides that his time has come to die, writes a death-bed message, and awaits death till daybreak. In the morning, smiling the happy smile of a man who has escaped death by a miracle, he explains to Dasha the cause of this fortunate outcome by the words: "If a man leads a proper, regular life, my dear Dasha, no poison will do him any harm...."

"No—it must have been bad kerosene," sighs Dasha, thinking of her expenses and staring fixedly before her. "The shopman must have given me the low grade, for one and a half kopeks, instead of the highest grade. Miserable sufferer that I am! Accursed tyrants, may you burn in hell, you Herods."

And her tongue ran on and on.

In this story there is everything that is to be found

in the ordinary contributions to *Oskolki:* How many writers in comic papers made scolding housekeepers and tipsy men, to whom anything might happen, the target of their wit! But in Antosha Chekhontey's story all this is transformed by a smile for the tragicomedy of the lonely man's life. This escaped Leikin. Nor did he see that the figure of Dasha, with her fanatical narrow-mindedness, her fixed stare, and her monstrous absorption in trifles, is a classical figure. Leikin saw nothing in the story but its entertainment value. Like Dasha, he stared fixedly before him and saw nothing but trifles, the "fragments" of life. His was the professional *Oskolki* view.

And Chekhov continued his innovator's work, learning to express the most profound thoughts, to create powerful images in the "low" style of humorous trifles, miniature tales.

The modesty with which his gifts as an innovator first showed themselves was itself in striking harmony with Chekhov's literary and human aspect. He did not aspire to make a literary revolution, he honestly described scenes from everyday life, wrote little tales for comic papers, adhering closely to all the rules for the "low" style. But his modest everyday scenes are recognized as masterpieces the world over.

Many readers and critics at first ranked Antosha Chekhontey among the ordinary purveyors of entertaining reading matter. But the more sensitive readers began to realize with increasing clarity that they were confronted by something new, something that only outwardly resembled the usual thing.

And this "usual thing" was precisely what Leikin wanted. He did not like *Sergeant Prishibeyev* at all. He had a remarkable "inverted" intuition—he was almost certain to dislike just that new which Chekhov put into the *Oskolki* genre. The exceptions to this were few and merely proved the rule—after all Leikin only liked

Carelessness because he had taken it for a perfectly model *Oskolki* story.

If Antosha Chekhontey had listened to Leikin he would never have become Chekhov.

Leikin had plenty of grounds for using his influence with Antosha Chekhontey. There was much that was alike in their lives. They came from the same environment. They both admitted themselves to be poles apart from "aristocratic literature," considering themselves to be "plebs." In his young days, in Taganrog, Chekhov had pored over Leikin's stories, had wanted to write like Leikin. Even later he admired Leikin's powers of observation, his individual touch in depicting everyday life.

From the purely literary standpoint Leikin may be called the direct forerunner of Chekhov in the sphere of miniature stories. He was, moreover, an experienced writer.

But Chekhov saw through Leikin, understanding that beneath his outward good-nature was concealed, as he wrote of Leikin in one of his letters, "a bourgeois to the marrow."

The struggle between Chekhov and Leikin—their relations may be best summed up in precisely this word—was of profound significance. The miniature story was Leikin's own genre. It became Chekhov's.

While introducing the "plebeian" genre into upper-class literature, Chekhov at the same time purged it of bourgeois vulgarity, showing that the miniature story is not merely a vessel for ridiculing drunken merchants, but that it can be invested with poetic content, that the wealth of it may be no less than that of a long story, an epic poem, or a novel. Chekhov brought about a revolution in the genre.

This is the way of the innovator. He takes what life has to offer, but adapts it, passes it through the mill, moulds the whole material anew.

Life threatened to choke Chekhov's talent with the weeds of the Leikin style, the harsh, obdurate, hard-boiled demands of the funny-story genre, whose limits would seem to exclude the possibility of introducing any serious content whatsoever. Leikin himself was a living example of this hard-boiled obduracy. Chekhov groaned beneath the weight of the demands imposed on him by the "Leikin" genre. Throughout his letters we find heartbreaking complaints that he is forced to take the very essence out of his stories. What could be more harmful, more dangerous for a maturing talent! But Chekhov knew how to wrench something useful to himself out of what was dangerous. He forced himself to "submit" to the demands of the genre, but only for the sake of wrestling stubbornly with the resistant material. He embarked upon a patient study from within of the subtle laws governing the very short story, discovering all its hidden potentialities. In time it was the genre which "submitted" to the will of genius. The material became malleable to the hand of the master.

In his miniature stories Chekhov learned to present the whole life of a man, the very current taken by the stream of his life. The tiny story was raised to the heights of epic narrative. Chekhov became the creator of a new form of literature—the very short story, containing within it, as if in solution, a long story and a novel. And that which had at first caused him such suffering—the necessity for ruthless cutting, erasing, rejecting—was now converted into an artistic tenet. His letters, conversations, and notebooks were interspersed with brief, expressive remarks, style formulas, such as: "Brevity is the sister of talent," "The art of writing is the art of contracting," "To write well, i.e., briefly," "I know how to talk briefly about big things." The last formula is an exact definition of the essence of the skill attained by Chekhov.

One is struck, in reading the stories of Antosha Chekhontey, by the writer's early maturity. Chekhov had become a master of his art in three or four years. None but a wise, mature artist could have created *The Malefactor* or *A Daughter of Albion*. The early artistic maturity of Chekhov can only be compared with that of Pushkin and Lermontov.

This maturity was attained by Chekhov at the cost of arduous toil. His contemporaries testify that, as early as the *Oskolki* period, Chekhov had thrown off the carefree attitude characteristic of his literary beginnings.

"Chekhov was no precocious darling of fortune," writes one of his contemporaries, A. Lazarev-Gruzinsky, "he won his way to success by slow, hard, 'convict' labour, as Bilibin, a journalist and the secretary of the office of *Oskolki*, who got to know Chekhov before I did, expressed himself in a letter to me."

"Slow" does not, in the present instance, imply slowness in time, it means persistent. Just as Chekhov learned to put enormous content into very short stories, to "compress" them, to make them as capacious and full as possible, he learned to make time itself capacious—reducing, compressing to the utmost limits, the path dividing the novice from the mature master. An ever greater wealth of the very colour of life begins to appear in his stories, in which the profound tragic theme pointed out by Maxim Gorky makes itself increasingly felt.

"The esteemed public," wrote Gorky, "reading *A Daughter of Albion* laughs over it, without probably seeing in this story the odious mockery of a lonely person, to whom all and everything are alien, by a well-fed gentleman. And in every one of Anton Pavlovich's humorous stories I detect the low, deep sigh of a pure and truly human heart.... Nobody has ever understood the tragedy of life's trifles so subtly and penetratingly as Anton Chekhov, nobody has ever revealed to his fellow-

creatures so ruthlessly and fairly the shameful, dismal picture of their lives in the murky chaos of commonplace vulgarity."

Even in his earliest stories Chekhov comes forward as the artistic representative of the "little man," as his friend and champion.

A shabby-looking young woman approaches a "gracious gentleman" (*The Ram and the Spinster*), on whose well-nourished, shining countenance could be read the agonizing after-dinner boredom he was enduring. She timidly asks him for a free railway pass to go to her home. She has heard that he sometimes extends such charitable aid, and her mother is ill at her far-away home. The "gracious gentleman" is glad of distraction. He asks the girl where she works, what her salary is, who her young man is. She confidingly tells him all about herself, even reading a letter she has received from her parents. The conversation lasts a long time. Eight o'clock strikes. The "gracious gentleman" gets up.

" 'I shall be late for the theatre. Good-bye, Marya Yefimovna.'

" 'And may I hope?' asks the young woman, getting up.

" 'What for?'

" 'Why, that you will give me a free pass. . . .' "

With a delighted chuckle he explains to her that she has come to the wrong door. The railway official who could help her lives up another stairway. "Up the other stairway she was told he had left for Moscow at half past seven."

Prosperous vulgarity with its careless scorn for "little" people, for the "small fry" (as another of Chekhov's early stories was called), found in the person of Antosha Chekhontey an irreconcilable foe.

Chekhov is the painter of everyday life. And he treats the gloomiest, most appalling features of this everyday life with an unemphatic simplicity that in itself conveys

the impression of the predominance of the gloomy and appalling in contemporary life.

Thus Chekhov became ever closer and more essential to the reader, the "little man" in search of a literature dealing with his own hard life.

The writer himself was, however, far from realizing how necessary, how valuable he was to the reader. He could not help feeling his own loneliness.

The society into which Chekhov was plunged in the first years of his authorship was that of journalists, the day-labourers of the bourgeois press, the literary hacks. Chekhov wrote to his brother Alexander that to be a journalist meant, "to say the least of it, to be a rogue," and he grieved to find himself "in that set," shaking hands with them, and to hear, he jested wryly, that he had "begun to look like a rogue at a distance." He goes on to express his firm conviction that "sooner or later he will isolate himself." "I'm a journalist because I write a lot, but this is only temporary... I shall not die a journalist."

The best people in this society, people who were honest and able but did not possess real talent—that is to say, the power to concentrate their will—did not manage to "isolate" themselves, and were gradually demoralized by the vulgarity around them, or took to drink, and died young. Such, for instance, was the fate of Chekhov's friend, the poet Palmin. This was a man of the sixties through and through. He wrote verse in the Nekrasov tradition; the censors considered him "a Red," saying that "his lines dripped poison." He was a gentle, tactful man, avoiding vulgarity and coarseness like the plague, spiritually extremely close to many of Chekhov's characters. Some of the features of Doctor Ragin in *Ward No. 6* were supplied from Chekhov's observation of Palmin. Writing of him to another friend, Bilibin, Chekhov said:

"Palmin is the poet type—if you admit of the existence of such a type. A lyrical personality, in a continual state of enthusiasm, crammed with themes and ideas.... He never bores one. True, you have to drink a lot, talking to him, but on the other hand, you may be quite sure you will never hear a single lying word, a single vulgar phrase in the course of a three- or four-hour conversation, and that's worth sacrificing a little sobriety."

When we remember Chekhov's scorn of lying and vulgarity—and in the journalist-newspaper world he met them at every step—we can understand the pleasure he took in talking to a man so decent, so honest, so intelligent, and so poetic as Palmin. But this man sank daily lower and lower. His drunkenness became more and more outrageous. Palmin died young, without having fulfilled his promise or realized his potentialities.

Chekhov had no friends capable of really understanding and appreciating his work. The criticism he did get was bound to increase his sense of loneliness.

The liberal and liberal-Narodnik criticism of the time was incapable of appreciating his talent. The most influential critics of the day, among whom was N. K. Mikhailovsky, the leader of Narodism in the eighties, saw in the young Chekhov nothing but a talented entertainer, distinguished from others by nothing but his honesty. It now seems incredible that such an opinion could prevail after the publication of *Chameleon, Sergeant Prishibeyev* and *A Daughter of Albion.*

The critics were led astray both by the *Oskolki* atmosphere, in which Chekhov's stories appeared, and by the Chekhov manner, sometimes in no way differing superficially from that of the usual humorous bagatelle.

Even in this period, however, when Chekhov himself still did not regard literature as his main occupation, which he still considered to be the study of medicine, he was imbued with a profound awareness of his respon-

sibility to the reader. True, this responsibility was still, in his own eyes, merely that of an honest humorous writer. But this only makes his recognition of his responsibility as a writer, even at that period, his serious attitude to his humour as to real work, all the more characteristic; however humble and limited the significance of the work in progress, it must be carried out efficiently and earnestly.

He expressed this attitude to his duties as a humourist in a story called *Marya Ivanovna*, written in 1883. This story is somewhat surprising from Chekhov, with his dislike for emotions and moralizing. In this story he felt a need to express himself to his reader. Here is an extract from *Marya Ivanovna:*

"All we humorous writers, as many of us as there are in Russia, are people just like yourselves, like your brother, and like your sister-in-law. We have just the same nerves, livers and spleen.. At times our blood runs cold just as yours does. The same things worry us that worry you. Believe it or not, but we humorous writers are capable of feeling distress at, say, the closing of a children's hospital in Moscow, or at the fact that mortals still continue to take bribes, after having read Gogol. Our distress may be great, heartfelt and heart-rending. But if we were now, under the influence of this distress, to stop writing till a new hospital is opened, the whole of humorous writing, as it at present exists, must come to an end.

"And we mustn't let this happen, reader. It may be very small and drab, it may not rouse that laughter which cramps the facial muscles and dislocates the jaw, but still it exists and does its work. We can't do without it. If we depart and abandon the field of battle for a single moment, our places will immediately be taken by clowns in foolscaps and harness-bells, or by cadets describing their ridiculous amorous adventures to the command of: 'left, right!'

"So apparently it is my duty to write, even if my wife betrays me and I have an intermittent fever. It is my duty to write as well as I can. Even given the atrocious combination of mishaps I have just described, it is my duty to write without stopping."

Even then, we note, participation in comic papers was a field of battle for Chekhov, the battle against lies and vulgarity. He feels his duty to the reader, to the "small fry" so dear to his heart, recognizes his obligation to ennoble humorous writing. A writer is a man with a duty. This conviction was formed early in Chekhov.

Leikin greatly disliked this appeal to the reader. "I did not find it convenient to print your story *Marya Ivanovna* in *Oskolki*," he wrote to the author. "Do forgive me, but it is written in a very intimate way, and I try to avoid that in *Oskolki*."

What Leikin wanted was to amuse the reader. Perhaps he even sensed that Chekhov's "intimate" converse with the reader was directed also against himself.

THE SATIRIST

In its essence the struggle of Leikin against Chekhov was also a struggle against the satirical side of Chekhov's talent, against the profound tragic theme already making its appearance in the early works of the young writer, a theme closely connected with the championship of the "little man," with the continuation of the great traditions of Russian literature. In his championship of the "little man" and in his satirical drive, Chekhov comes forward as the exponent of the traditions of Gogol and Shchedrin.

The first period of Chekhov's creative development would seem to bear the impress of three distinct artistic aims. Chekhov scattered his whimsical humour, scintillating and sympathetic, in funny stories and farces. At the same time Chekhov's *satire* became clearly defined. And from the middle of the eighties stories began to make their appearance which no longer come directly under the heading of humour or satire, stories in which the writer soft-pedals his own attitude to his creation, his poetic individuality, striving to tone down the satirical and humorous colouring, so that the reader may receive a picture of Russian reality in which all colours are represented. Side by side with the poetic, dramatic and tragic elements in these stories, there exist both the comic and the satirical elements, but now they have gone underground, into the subterranean current of the work.

Chekhov's very first story, *Letter from a Don Landowner*, is really satirical. In that same year, 1880, when Chekhov's name first appeared in print, a story called *Apples* came out over the signature of Chekhontey in the pages of the frivolous *Strekoza*. The democratic passion of the twenty-year-old author reveals itself clearly in this story. Chekhontey describes with loathing and detestation the type of serf-owning landed proprietor. Coming upon an amorous couple in his orchard—a peasant lad and a village girl—and discovering that the lad had picked an apple from the gentleman's apple-tree for his beloved, landowner Trifon Semyonovich, with the sensuality of a nasty old dodderer, invents a despicable punishment. He forces the girl to flog her betrothed, and the lad to beat her. His pleasure springs precisely from the fact that he has managed to destroy human emotions, to spit on a fellow-creature's soul, to humiliate human beings.

" 'You may go now, my dears. Good-bye. I'll send you apples for your wedding.'

"And Trifon Semyonovich bowed low to the chastised pair.

"The youth and maiden recovered themselves and went away. The youth went to the right, the girl to the left, and to this day they have never met again."

Such a story, though the work of a tyro, cannot be called weak, though Chekhov did not include it in his collected works. Trifon Semyonovich and his servile henchman Karpushka, the whole scene of the mockery, are described with considerable strength and expressiveness. The story is of interest to us first and foremost because it shows clearly the social spirit in which the youthful author started on his path in life. It is, however, no less interesting as an aid for the understanding of the further development of Chekhov's artistic skill. There were certain features in *Apples* which he later dropped—the too

obvious tendency to expose, superfluous direct intervention by the author. The manner of the story is utterly unlike that of the mature Chekhov, who strove to convey, with as little direct revelation of the author's personality as possible, a picture of life as it is, a picture which, in all its artistic essence, with all its truthfulness, becomes a substitute for the author's intervention. The trend of thought must follow from the characters, from these, and from the truth to life adduced by the artist—such were the aims of Chekhov. *Apples* is so written that its content appears to be an illustration of a given theme, material gathered to show the horror of hang-overs from feudalism. The author begins his story by expressing outspoken indignation with Trifon Semyonovich:

"...If this world were not this world, and things were called by their proper names, Trifon Semyonovich would be called by another name than Trifon Semyonovich; he would be given a name usually reserved for horses or cows. Frankly, Trifon Semyonovich was a beast. I call upon him to agree to this himself. If this invitation should reach him (he reads *Strekoza* sometimes) he will probably not be angry, for, being a man of understanding, he will fully agree with me and no doubt, of his bounty, even send me a few score Antonovka apples in the autumn in gratitude for my abstaining from announcing his name in full and limiting myself for once to giving only his name and patronymic. I will not describe all Trifon Semyonovich's virtues, it would take too long, but will content myself with a single incident."

Going on to inform his readers how "deftly Trifon Semyonovich, like all his tribe, takes the law into his own hands," the author addresses the reader with a direct question: "Is this news to you? There are people for whom it is as stale and commonplace as a farm-cart." The story ends with certain information characterizing Trifon Semyonovich's "attitude to human beings," and

the author's own summing-up which is associated with the beginning of the story:

"... This is how Trifon Semyonovich amuses himself in his old age. And his family are not far behind him. His daughters have the habit of fastening onions to the caps of visitors 'of the baser sort,' while drunken visitors in the same category have the words 'Ass' and 'Fool' chalked in big letters on their backs. His son, Mitya, a retired lieutenant, outdid his own Father last winter—in company with Karpushka he besmeared with tar the gate of a retired soldier who had refused to give Mitya a wolf-cub, and was supposed to have warned his daughters against the gingerbread and sweets of Mr. Retired Lieutenant.

"So how can you treat him like a decent human being!"

Here all is suffused with youthfully sincere, ardent indignation. The author is outraged by his recent discovery that Trifon Semyonoviches still live and prosper in the world and are respectfully called "Trifon Semyonovich, and not beasts." And the author hastens to bring all this to the knowledge of his readers. He shows the rottenness of his principal character by an instance characterizing his attitude to human beings, and produces evidence serving as proof of the loathsomeness of Trifon Semyonovich and his whole family. The author invites the reader to share his indignation, not forgetting to add that, incredible as this may seem, Trifon Semyonovich is no exception, but an ordinary phenomenon.

The budding writer did not as yet understand that the enumeration of the disgusting qualities of the family of Trifon Semyonovich has nothing to do with artistic creation, that such an enumeration can have no emotional impact on the reader, and that a single lively detail—the introducing of Trifon Semyonovich's pretty daughter Sashenka, running out to call him to tea and breaking into

House in Taganrog where A. P. Chekhov was born

The Chekhov family, 1875

peals of laughter at "Papa's little trick," is a thousand times more convincing than the enumeration of thousands of disgusting qualities. The young author likewise failed to understand that feelings of detestation for the commonplace nature of loathsome and appalling phenomena can be evoked in the reader not so much by the author's own outspoken indignation as by the narrator's intonations, making it apparent that the appalling is commonplace and, consequently, doubly appalling. Trifon Semyonovich is shown in the story as a kind of monster, an exception from the rule—such is the inverse effect of the exclamation marks scattered by the author. And the author has failed to infect his reader with his own indignation that "society" should address a man like the principal character in his story as Trifon Semyonovich, and not as a beast. This could only be done if the reader, while acquainting himself with this character's loathsome qualities, meets with some lively detail witnessing to the respectful or indifferent attitude of "society" to such personages as Trifon Semyonovich. By way of illustration we may recall *In the Gully* and the emotional shock received when reading of the respect paid by the local "aristocracy," all the "respectable" folk, to Aksinya, though everyone was perfectly aware that she had murdered Lipa's infant son, who was an obstacle in the way of the heartless beast of prey. This time Chekhov expresses no personal emotions, he "simply" describes the respect enjoyed by Aksinya.

We have dwelt at such length on the immature story *Apples* in order to emphasize the enormous distance covered by Chekhov the satirist in such an amazingly brief period—a mere three or four years—from this story to such heights as are reached in *Chameleon, In the Landau, The Mask*, and *Sergeant Prishibeyev*. A comparison of *Apples* with the works which came after it clearly shows the direction in which the writer's skill was devel-

oping, the way in which he was forging out his own manner, his own style. In the more mature stories he departs from all that characterized *Apples*—the outspoken expression of his indignation as an author with the hideousness of reality—and the more impassive, the less tendentious the author, the greater the reader's indignation with the monstrosities and foulness of the life he reproduces. Of course it by no means follows that this is the path to be laid down for every writer, that the direct, personal "obtrusion" of the author's personality must invariably and inevitably weaken the artistic force of a work. For Chekhov, this path was obligatory, for in this path he found himself, his specific artistic traits.

It is precisely in his satirical stories that the democratic, "plebeian" element in Chekhov's work during the earliest period is most conspicuous. The very word "plebeian" was, by the way, a favourite of Chekhov's. Chekhov always regards his favourite character, the one nearest to himself, as "the little man," the ordinary human being, the man from the masses, the "pleb." Such, for instance, is Nikolai Yevgrafich, the main character in *The Wife*, whose existence is poisoned by a family of bloodsuckers, to whom his simplicity and trustfulness have made him a prey. "His pride, his plebeian fastidiousness were affronted," writes Chekhov of his hero. The very words "plebeian fastidiousness"—as against "aristocratic fastidiousness"—are profoundly characteristic of Chekhov. Plebeian fastidiousness in regard to aristocratic indolence and bourgeois ways is a quality of so many of his characters, because it was a marked quality of the author himself.

The story *In the Landau* is imbued with extraordinary "plebeian" feeling. A sixteen-year-old girl from the provinces, visiting her grand relations in Petersburg, drives along Nevsky Prospect in a landau with her town cousins,

the daughters of Privy Councillor Brindin. The girl shocks them by her simplicity and absurd questions.

" 'How much does your Porfiry get?' she asked, nodding towards the footman.

" 'Forty rubles a month, I believe.'

" '*Does* he? My brother Seryozha is a teacher and he only gets thirty! Is work really so highly paid in Petersburg?'

" 'Don't put such questions, Marfusha,' said Zena, 'and don't keep looking around you like that! It isn't nice.' "

In the landau Baron Dronkel is holding forth.

" 'Tell me, Mesdames, frankly, your hand on your heart, do you like Turgenev?'

" 'Why, of course! Turgenev....'

" 'For goodness' sake! Everyone I ask likes him, but I ... don't understand. Either I lack the brains, or I'm a desperate sceptic, but all this fuss over Turgenev seems to me exaggerated, if not ridiculous. He writes very smoothly, sometimes his style is lively, he has humour, but ... nothing special. He writes like all Russian scribblers.... Like Grigoryevich, and Krayevsky. Turgenev's a good writer, I don't deny it, but I don't admit his ability to perform miracles, as people declare. He is said to have given an impetus to self-awareness, aroused some sort of political conscience in the Russian people.... I see nothing of all that. I don't understand....'

" 'Ah, but have you read his *Oblomov**?' asked Zena. 'He comes out against the serf system there.'

" 'True.... I'm against serfdom, too, but is it worth making such a fuss about it?'

" 'Do tell him to be quiet! For God's sake!' whispered Marfusha to Zena.

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* The point here is that, as every Russian knows, *Oblomov* was written by Goncharov.—*Ed.*

"Zena glanced in astonishment at the naive, timid girl. The eyes of the provincial visitor darted restlessly from face to face, and there was a dangerous gleam in them, as if their owner were seeking someone to pour out all her hatred and contempt on. Her lips quivered with rage.

" 'It's improper, Marfusha," whispered Zena. 'You have tears in your eyes.'

" 'They say, too, that he had a great influence on the development of our social life,' continued the Baron. 'Where does it show? I can't see any influence, sinner that I am! He never had any influence on me, for example.'

"The landau came to a stop in front of the *porte-cochère* of the Brindin mansion."

The landau came to a stop. Vulgarity had made a full circle and returned on itself. Turgenev, "for goodness' sake!" had no influence on Baron Dronkel. It would seem that the very landau could bear no more and had brought it all to a stop by drawing up in front of the Brindin mansion. Baron Dronkel's declaration that Turgenev had no influence on him is remarkable for its utter precision—Turgenev could certainly have had no influence on the Dronkels and the Brindins, whom nothing could shake.

At first sight it might appear that there is nothing in the winding-up of the story, in the stopping of the landau in front of the Brindin mansion, but the simple conveying of a fact. The author might have chosen any background for the Baron's chatter—say the drawing-room in Privy Councillor Brindin's house. Or he might have brought his story to an end by merely saying that the landau continued its way along Nevsky Prospect. But in neither of these cases would the story have had such a perfect ending, emphasizing the vicious circle in which vulgarity is confined, returning ever upon itself. The landau is required precisely for this ending, for an ending which, as so often in Chekhov's stories, seems to make no sort of pretensions, but which is in reality the acme

of art. The stopping of the landau in front of the Brindin mansion simultaneously closes two parallel avenues: on the one hand, the vulgarity of Baron Dronkel; on the other, the youthful indignation of the girl from the provinces. If the landau had not stopped, her hatred, scorn, repressed rage might all have come to the surface and drowned the genteel landau. Chekhov is perfectly objective in this story, directly expressing neither scorn, rage, nor sympathy with the provincial girl; he "simply" creates a "picture of life." And yet how clear it is that the author's feelings are on the side of the girl.

And with what plebeian scorn is the appearance of Baron Dronkel described, this freshly-washed and dandified gentleman, in his blue overcoat and blue hat! Yes, the note of scorn is that which belongs most closely of all to Chekhov as satirist. His satire contains none of Gogol's ferociously gay, menacing thunderclaps, of Shchedrin's sacred and scathing wrath, but this does not weaken his satire, does not prevent him from slaughtering his foes. To each his own. The satire of Shchedrin is frequently of an argumentative nature, a kind of peculiar treatise on the circumstances investigated by the author. Chekhov's satire is usually expressed in the forms of pictures of reality, aiming at nothing but the truthful, exact reproduction of life. But this does not make him the less a satirist. Just as in Gogol's story the carriage served as the place of execution of the unforgettable Chertokutsky, a society "lion," the ornament of the nobility, Chekhov's "landau," in its carefree passage along Nevsky Prospect, witnessed the moral execution of all the Dronkels and Brindins.

It is not out of place to note here the impossibility of completely agreeing with the attitude to the endings of Chekhov's stories of certain critics who consider that they are marked by vagueness, by an absence of definite conclusions, by uncertainty, as it were, on the threshold of

conclusion. It is quite true that Chekhov's stories often end in uncertainty as to what ought to be done, as to what way out can be found from the surrounding vulgarity. At the same time, however, clear sentence is always pronounced in Chekhov's stories against the reality he presents. And therefore it is that the endings are always marked by finality, even when they express the uncertainty or the inability of the characters or the author himself to solve the conflicting problems and "accursed riddles" of reality.

A great role is played in Chekhov's satire, and indeed in all his work, by the exposure of the servile officialdom or the intellectual employees. *The Mask* is a bitter pamphlet on this subject. A drunken local magnate, millionaire, industrialist, well-known patron of charities, and bounder drives out of the reading-room, during a fancy-dress ball at the social club, the respectable local "intellectuals," who, "their noses and beards buried in the newspapers," were "reading, dozing, and, in the words of the special correspondent of the Moscow and Petersburg newspapers (a most liberally-inclined gentleman) 'meditating.'" The thinking intellectuals do not recognize the public benefactor—he wears a mask. They are hurt in their dignity, wounded in their best feelings, in their respect for so sacred a sanctuary of culture as a reading-room. The stranger insults all these gentlemen with unheard-of grossness, demanding that they immediately leave the reading-room and enable him to convert it into a tavern with naked "mesdemoiselles." What could be worse blasphemy for intellectuals than such an affront to what they consider the very essence of a thinking man's soul? A terrific row ensues. What is the confusion of the thinking gentlemen when the stranger tears off his mask! "The intellectuals exchanged bewildered glances and turned pale, some were seen to scratch the backs of their heads....

" 'Well, are you going?' asked Pyatigorov, after a short pause.

"The intellectuals tiptoed out of the reading-room without uttering a word...."

They roamed about the club dejected, miserable, penitent, whispering to one another, like people who sense disaster. Their wives and daughters, hearing that Pyatigorov had been "insulted" and was offended, fell silent and began leaving for their homes. The dancing ceased.

But what is the joy of the intellectuals, when, waiting for the great man to come out of the reading-room, they see that the perfectly tipsy Pyatigorov has forgotten the "insult" offered him. "Going into the ball-room he sat down beside the band and dozed to the sound of the music, till at last, his head bowed mournfully, he began to snore.

" 'Stop playing!' cried the masters of ceremonies, waving at the musicians. 'Sh.... Yegor Nilich is asleep.'

" 'Would you like me to see you home, Yegor Nilich?' enquired Belebukhin, bending down to the millionaire's ear.

"Pyatigorov protruded his lips as if trying to blow a fly off his cheek.

" 'Would you like me to see you home?' repeated Belebukhin. 'Or shall I tell them to bring your carriage round?'

" 'Hey? What? Ha! It's you.... What d'you want?'

" 'To see you home ... time to go bye-bye.'

" 'Home. I want to go home ... take me home....'

"Beaming with satisfaction, Belebukhin helped Pyatigorov to his feet. The rest of the intellectuals came running up, wreathed in smiles, and together they lifted the hereditary honourable citizen to his feet, and bore him with elaborate care to his carriage.

" 'Only an artist, a man of talent, could have taken in a whole company like that,' babbled Zhestyakov cheerfully, helping the millionaire into his carriage. 'I'm literally amazed, Yegor Nilich. I can't stop laughing.

even now ... ha-ha.... And we all got so excited and fussy! Ha-ha-ha! Believe me I never laughed so much at the theatre. Such depths of humour! I shall remember this unforgettable evening all my life.'

"After seeing Pyatigorov off, the intellectuals felt cheered and consoled.

" 'He shook hands with me,' boasted Zhestyakov, in high glee. 'So it's all right, he isn't angry.'

" 'Let's hope not!' sighed Yevstrat Spiridonich. 'He's a scoundrel, a bad lot but—he's our benefactor. You've got to be careful.' "

The subject of the story is of acute significance; the incident described is a comparatively rare one, distinctly exceptional—not without reason were the intellectuals outraged. But in this exceptional case is revealed the bottomless obsequiousness of these "thinking," college-bred, respectable, liberally inclined gentlemen, the best representatives of "society." There is nothing theoretical about their flunkeyism, the word may be used in its literal sense, and the difference between themselves and real flunkeys is merely one of verbal language, and but slight at that. The very word "intellectuals," so often repeated in the story, resounds like a box on the ear. Particularly good is the speech of Zhestyakov, the bank-manager, in which flunkeyism and "intellectuality" are fused in a single whole, resulting in a kind of intellectual flunkeyism with idioms all its own: "Such depths of humour!"

The idea of the servility of intellectual employees is one that seldom left Chekhov. The lady with the dog "lost in the provincial crowd, in no way remarkable, holding a silly lorgnette in her hand," who filled the entire life of Dmitri Dmitrievich Gurov, would have remained an enigma for the reader if she had not uttered two phrases—just two brief phrases: "My husband is no doubt an honest, worthy man, but he is a flunkey. I don't know

what it is he does at his office, but I know he's a flunkey...." When he arrives at the town in which "the lady with the dog" lives, Gurov sees her husband at the theatre.

"Anna Sergeyevna was accompanied by a tall, round-shouldered young man with small whiskers, who nodded at every step before sitting down at her side and seemed to be continually bowing to someone. This must be her husband, whom, in a fit of bitterness, at Yalta, she had called a 'flunkey.' And there really was something of the flunkey's servility in his lanky figure, his side-whiskers, and the little bald spot on the top of his head. And he smiled sweetly, and the badge of some scientific society gleaming in his buttonhole was like the number on a footman's livery." This scientific badge, which is likened to the badge usually worn by flunkeys, is a significant feature. As we read of Gurov and Anna Sergeyevna aimlessly ascending and descending the stairs during the interval, while "figures flashed by in the uniforms of legal officials, high-school teachers and civil servants, all wearing badges," the poignant irony of the words: "all wearing badges" clearly implies that they were all flunkeys, nothing but educated flunkeys. This very von Diederitz, the husband of Anna Sergeyevna, Modeste Alexeyevich (*The Three Annas*), and all those badged gentlemen would, in like circumstances, have behaved just as the intellectuals of *The Mask* behaved. All their learning, respectability and honours were but a mask scarcely concealing their essential flunkeyism. And Chekhov tore off their mask, just as Gogol had done in his inspired sketch "In the Ante-Room," into which he managed to crowd not only the flunkeys themselves, but the aristocratic officials of St. Petersburg.

The target of Chekhov's satire was servile liberalism. Such classical figures of Russian satire as the hero of *Death of a Clerk*, *The Fat One and the Thin One*,

Reference Wanted, *Chameleon*, *Sergeant Prishibeyev*, are more or less akin, in a general way, to the satirical figures of Gogol and Shchedrin. It is noteworthy that in this cycle of stories Chekhov resorts to conscious exaggeration and the satirization of characters and circumstances. The death from fear of the petty official because he had accidentally sneezed over the bald spot of a General (not our chief) is of course something of a caricature, emphasizing the whole lamentable, shameful and pitiful truth of life.

The peaks of Chekhov's satire are, of course, *Sergeant Prishibeyev* and *Chameleon*. *Sergeant Prishibeyev* was to all outward appearance quite an unpretentious tale. It appeared in the columns of the newspaper with the subtitle "A Scene from Life," and really did seem to be just another jocose description of a retired sergeant, fond of instructing the "ignorant people." But this "Scene from Life" included a veritably classical character, one which has justly taken its place among the most famous characters of Russian and world satire. Prishibeyev shares the notoriety of Gogol's Sobakevich, Nozdryov and Skvoznik-Dmukhanovsky, of Saltykov-Shchedrin's Ugryum-Burcheyev and Judas Golovlyov. And yet Sergeant Prishibeyev is not a character from a play or novel, but merely from an exceedingly brief short story. "Prishibeyevism" has become a symbol of blustering, obtuse complacency, vain, cock-sure ignorance, of a flunkeyish contempt for the people, rude, absurd officiousness and an overweening desire to check and trample upon every manifestation of human vitality. For Chekhov's contemporaries, moreover, Prishibeyev symbolized all the reactionary forces of the age, with their desire to "freeze," to check the very life of their country. One can only marvel at the mastery achieved by such a young writer, a mastery inspired by love of freedom and abhorrence of tyranny, which made it possible for him, in a story of

almost absurdly small dimensions, to create such a significant satirical type. All that can be said of the types created by Gogol applies to Prishibeyev. Were there many landowners in real life like Plyushkin*? Certainly not! Plyushkin was an exception, a monstrosity. But this very monstrosity, this satirization of the character, brought out with extraordinary artistic force that which was typical. Plyushkin is the essence of the rotten system of feudal serfdom. Were there many such zealous upholders of the police-cum-serfdom principle, such enthusiasts for Pobedonostsev's regime as Prishibeyev was? Again it must be stated that Prishibeyev was a ludicrous exception. But here also it is this exception that embodies the very spirit of police regime, tyranny and reaction.

Chameleon is equally worthy of a place among the works produced by the genius of Gogol and Shchedrin.

Like the figure of Prishibeyev, the character of "Chameleon" is typical of an age in which apostasy, opportunism and time-serving were rife. Ochumelov, ordinary police official as he was, became a significantly typical figure.

Chekhov once said in a letter to Leikin that he envied the latter because he had come into the world earlier than himself and had had the luck to live during the sixties, when one could breathe more freely, when the censorship was not so all-powerful, and true satire could raise its head. Chekhov was too modest to realize the significance of his own productions. In the era of Pobedonostsev he restored the glorious traditions of Russian satire to literature. In *Oskolki*, *Strekoza* and *Razvlecheniye* he managed, as Pobedonostsev's censorship aptly put it when discussing *Sergeant Prishibeyev,* to castigate the *monstrosity of the social structure.* Thus even in his earliest

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* Plyushkin—a landowner, one of the characters in Gogol's novel *Dead Souls*. The name has become a synonym for a miserly type.—*Ed.*

years Chekhov became a symbol of the moral strength of the Russian people and of Russian literature, which, even in such grim times as those, found ways, in the hardest conditions, of continuing the great struggle against obscurantism, lies, oppression, the struggle for truth and liberty.

To Chekhov's early period belong, as well as "purely" satirical or humorous stories, some in which humour, sometimes even farce, satire, drama and tragedy, are interwoven in an artistic whole best expressed in a melancholy smile over the absurdity and monstrosity of squalid, vulgar, commonplace life. An example of this is *The Wedding*, a one-act play which is an elaboration, on a much higher artistic level, of a former story of his, *A General at the Wedding*. Chekhov's own words about his technical approach to the subject (in reference to his play *Ivanov*) might also be applied to *The Wedding*: "I conclude each act as if it were a short story; after having kept the whole act very quiet and peaceful, I suddenly give the spectator a punch in the face." In *The Wedding* the sting comes at the end, when Revunov-Karaulov, an ancient dodderer who has agreed to attend the wedding-party because "it was lonesome at home," suddenly learns that his hosts have not simply invited him as a guest, but are "hiring" him for a twenty-five-ruble note, handed to him, as they fully believe, by a young man who had undertaken to "hire" a General for the wedding. And amidst the vortex of incredible vulgarity and triviality come the only human words: "How beastly! How base! To insult an old man, a sailor, a worthy officer! How base! How beastly!" In the story *A General at the Wedding* the dramatic element was weaker, only conveyed by the author in the narrative: "The old man glanced from the suddenly blushing Andryusha to his hostess, and saw it all. The 'prejudices' of a patriarchal family spoken of by Andryusha, rose before him in all their loathsomeness. . . .

His tipsiness vanished in a moment.... Rising from the table, he shuffled into the hall, put on his coat and went away....

"He never again went to a wedding."

In the play, the profound humiliation of the old man, his leaving the table, his bewilderment—the dramatic culmination—is emphasized and developed by being represented in action, and also by the fact that after the old man's departure, the wedding-party, a veritable triumph of vulgar imbecility and crudity, really begins to "go," the fun becomes fast and furious, and the impression of the insult to a fellow human is drowned in a silly hubbub. It is as if nothing out of the way had happened, as if a harmless person had not been wantonly insulted. After Revunov-Karaulov takes his departure, the bride's mother asks the young man, Andrei Andreyevich Nyunin, who had "hired" the General, what he had done with the twenty-five rubles. In the story Andryusha "blushed" when his swindle is discovered. In the play, he feels no embarrassment, merely striving to hush up the "unnecessary" talk, to let it be drowned by the din of the wedding-party.

NYUNIN: What's the use of talking about such trifles? As if it mattered! Must you spoil all the fun? (*Shouting.*) The health of the young couple! ... Here, musicians! Give us a march! (*The orchestra strikes up a march.*) The health of our young couple!

"ZMEYUKINA: I'm suffocating! Give me air! I can't breathe near you.

"YAT (*in high glee*): Divine woman, divine!

(*General hubbub.*)

"BEST MAN (*trying to make himself heard above, the din*): Ladies and gentlemen! On this, as they say, present day...."

We seem to hear stupidity triumphant in the notes of the march, joyously drowning the embarrassing talk about "trifles." The music itself is gleefully imbecile.

The din of wedding merriment, the sounds of the march, which one is tempted to call the march of stupidity triumphant, drown not only all talk of the twenty-five rubles appropriated by Nyunin, but also the insult to the old man. Chekhov often makes some word, character, or circumstance carry a dual meaning. In this case it is the word "trifles." It refers to the twenty-five-ruble note pocketed by Nyunin, and to the insult to the old General. From the point of view of Nyunin himself, the bride's mother and the assembled company, the money is even more important than the insult to the old man. The twenty-five-ruble note is at least remembered, whilst the episode with Revunov-Karaulov and his departure are not even mentioned—nothing has happened, all this was not even a trifle, it was a mere nothing that never occurred, more trifling than a trifle.

The ending of the dramatic sketch *The Wedding* is more emphatic in its exposure of hopeless, excruciating triviality than is that of the story on which it is based—*A General at the Wedding*. Not that Revunov-Karaulov himself is in any way a superior character; his behaviour at the wedding is absurd enough: melting with emotion at meeting a sailor among the guests and imagining himself among friends, he monopolizes the conversation with senile egoism, interlarding his conversation with incomprehensible nautical jargon, dominating the party. But it is precisely his behaviour which constitutes the comic value of the play, emphasizing the utter absurdity of the very idea of a General at a wedding-party.

The absurdity of middle-class snobbery, of the "patriarchal prejudice"—i.e., of the invitation of a General to a wedding-party—is comically emphasized precisely by these two parallel and independent streams—on the one

hand, the weird incomprehensible remarks issuing from the old "General," altogether superfluous and particularly ridiculous in the circumstances, on the other, the exuberance of the wedding festivities, the innumerable toasts prepared in advance, which Revunov-Karaulov will not allow anyone to propose. And yet, such as he is, the old man is a human being, as the words with which he expressed his injured feelings show, whereas it is impossible to hurt the feelings of Andrei Andreyevich Nyunin. It is the contrast between the human words and actions of the old man and the background, or, to employ midwife Zmeyukina's favourite word, "the atmosphere," of the party, which provided the dramatic note, keying up the effect of the offensive emptiness and obtusity of middle-class vulgarity.

In the monologue *On the Harmfulness of Smoking*, the traditional comic figure of a hen-pecked husband acquires an almost tragic tinge. The husband's lack of resolution, the wife's blatant vulgarity, and that of the life she has forced upon him, have reduced Ivan Ivanovich Nyukhin to a state of utter insignificance, and yet he feels that he is really "above it all," remembering that "he had once been young, intelligent, had attended the University, cherished aspirations, considered himself a human being...." There is something akin to Andrei Prozorov in *The Three Sisters* about this character. Their very speeches coincide in part: "Where is it now?" sighs Andrei. "Where is my past, when I was young and cheerful and intelligent, when I dreamed dreams and there was some grace in my thoughts, when the present and the future shone with hope for me?" Like Ivan Ivanovich, Andrei had also been a student, he had even dreamed of becoming a professor. And like Ivan Ivanovich, he became "the husband of his wife," a wife who was exactly like the wife of Ivan Ivanovich: insolent, stupid, aggressively vulgar, "an uncouth beast," as Andrei aptly describes her. And, like Ivan Iva-

novich Nyukhin, who meekly endures all the mortifications his wife inflicts upon him, Andrei Prozorov has become a spineless creature in the hands of his wife, who gets him a post in the Zemstvo council, where her lover is the chief.

Nikolai Sergeyevich in the story *Turmoil* is also as wax in the hands of his wife. The latter, Fedosya Vassilyevna, is the spiritual sister both of Natalya Ivanovna in *The Three Sisters* and Madame Nyukhina in the monologue *On the Harmfulness of Smoking*. She is a gross, bad-tempered, obtuse, tyrannical vulgarian who has appropriated the whole of her weak-willed husband's fortune. The outrageous search she causes to be made in the house for a missing brooch is revolting, the more that the young governess, Mashenka Pavletskaya, fresh from her studies, a bashful, dreamy girl, also has her room searched. When her husband ventures timidly to rebuke his wife for subjecting the governess to this humiliation and disgrace, Fedosya Vassilyevna replies:

" 'I don't say she took the brooch—but can you vouch for her? I for one don't trust those learned paupers too far.'

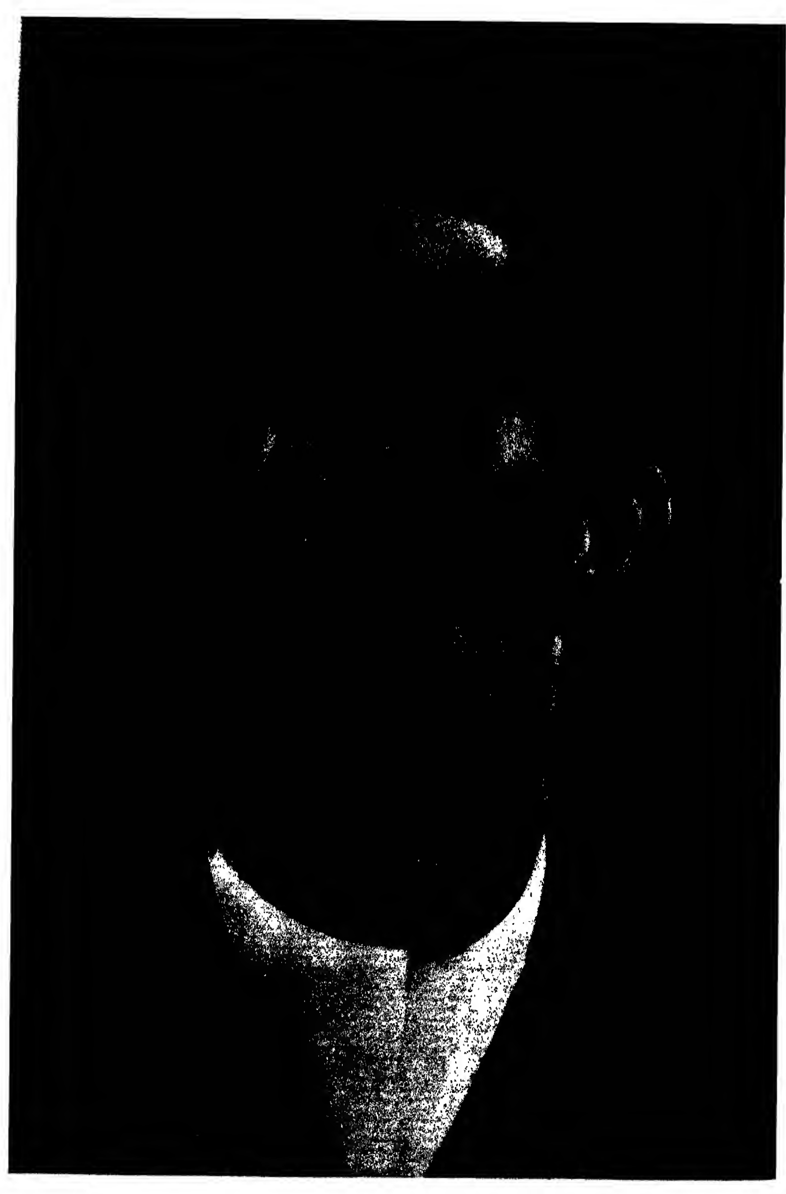
" 'You shouldn't have done it, Fedosya, really you shouldn't! I'm sorry, Fedosya, but you have no legal right to search people.'

" 'I know nothing about your laws! All I know is that my brooch has disappeared. And I mean to find it!' She banged on her plate with a fork, her eyes flashing wrathfully. 'You had better eat your dinner and mind your own business!'

"Nikolai Sergeyevich lowered his eyes meekly and sighed."

There is a close affinity between Fedosya Vassilyevna and Natalya Ivanovna. When Natalya Ivanovna says to the eighty-year-old Anfissa who had brought up the three sisters and worked in their home for thirty years: "How dare you sit in my presence! Get up! Get out!" and the

House in Alexandrovsk-Sakhalinsky where Chekhov lived in 1890



A. P. Chekhov, 1890

dumbfounded Olga rebukes Natalya Ivanovna for her rudeness, saying she cannot stand such treatment of human beings, that it "makes her ill," "depresses her," Natalya Ivanovna simply fails to understand what she is talking about. This scene is concluded in the spirit of Fedosya Vassilyevna:

"NATASHA: We must come to some sort of agreement, Olga. You work in your school, and I at home, you have your teaching, and I have the house to manage. If I say anything about the servants, it means I know what I'm talking about, I know what I'm talking about! . . . That old thief, that old hag... (*stamping her feet*) that witch... must leave here tomorrow! And don't you dare to cross me! Don't you dare!"

Madame Nyukhina, Natalya, Fedosya Vassilyevna are varieties of one and the same type, of which Zenaida Fyodorovna (*The Story of an Unknown Man*), a sweet, pure woman, rather like one of the "three sisters," insulted and driven to suicide by the cruel stepmother, Life, says: "When I think of my past, of my former life . . . of people in general—everything seems to be merged in a single image, that of my stepmother. Gross, brazen, callous, false, depraved, and a morphine addict into the bargain. My father, a weak, irresolute man, married my mother for her money and drove her into consumption, but his second wife, my stepmother, he loved passionately, to distraction. . . ."

All these are images of the terrible power of vulgarity, merged in the image of life, the stepmother Life, like a weed crowding out the "three sisters," breaking the heart of Mashenka Pavletskaya, making a hell of the childhood and youth of Zenaida Fyodorovna, ruining everything living, pure, human. And of course these vaudeville Ivans and Andreis, miserable slaves to the grim power of vulgarity, arouse nothing but contempt or contemptuous pity. Both of them—Ivan Ivanovich and Andrei Sergeye-

vich—are the heroes of a pitiful tragedy, and a pitiful tragedy is often nothing but a vaudeville, not, of course, the traditional high-spirited vaudeville, of which Chekhov has also given some fine specimens (*The Bear*, *The Proposal*, *The Jubilee*), but the vaudeville which merges in melodrama. All the same we are fully justified in regarding a monologue like *On the Harmfulness of Smoking* as a farce, though it is tragic as well as comic.

The term vaudeville may be used to cover the entire field of the comic, including phenomena not lending themselves to serious dramatic treatment. It applies equally to phenomena which are merely laughter-provoking and to those capable of arousing in us simultaneously both laughter and melancholy. We may grieve that life holds such fates as those of Ivan Ivanovich Nyukhin or Andrei Prozorov. But the persons themselves are too piteous, they are incapable of any serious action or emotion, they have succumbed too easily to the thraldom of vulgarity for their complaints of it not to be tinged with the same vulgarity.

We cannot help associating Ivan Ivanovich Nyukhin with his own waistcoat: "Old, poor and wretched, I am no better than this waistcoat of mine with its threadbare, shabby back. (*He turns his back to the audience.*)" This piteous buffoonery merely emphasizes the farcical, if mournful, nature of the scene. The wretched, threadbare, worn-out back of Nyukhin's waistcoat is his true "physiognomy"—hopelessly blurred. Even his past, when he used to think and dream, does not appear serious and profound to us, for what is truly serious and profound never gives up without a struggle. One cannot very well apply to the fate of Ivan Ivanovich Nyukhin the words: "All this would be funny if it were not so sad!" for notwithstanding the sadness of it, it really *is* funny. The vaudeville remains a vaudeville, but it is a satirical vaudeville, in which the sting is directed both against the represent-

atives of the terrible power of commonplace vulgarity—terrible owing to its prosaic everyday character—and against the "thinkers" and "dreamers" who succumb to it without a struggle. Though Madame Nyukhina never appears upon the scene in person, her image is conveyed in lifelike concreteness, for Chekhov knows how to create finished flesh-and-blood personages which exist only behind the scenes. Such are Mikhail Ivanovich Protopopov and Vershinin's wife in *The Three Sisters*, those invisible all-pervading characters.

The endeavour to blend comic and satirical with dramatic and tragic themes in a single artistic whole becomes a principle with Chekhov.

Chekhov began his literary career as a satirical and humorous writer, and ended it similarly—with his brilliant lyrical and satirical comedy *The Cherry Orchard.* He always remained faithful to the satirical, comedy nature of his literary gift. And therefore our division of his works under three headings, according to their trend, must inevitably be regarded as approximate, for the trends of Chekhov were frequently interwoven.

THE MASTER

The feeling of his responsibility as a writer developed still more intensively in Chekhov after an important event in his life which occurred in the spring of 1886. An unexpected joy came to him—a letter from the venerable writer Grigorovich, author of the once famous book *Anton the Unfortunate*, and the friend of Belinsky, Dostoyevsky and other famous Russian writers. Grigorovich greeted Chekov's talent with enthusiasm, adjured him not to waste it on trifles, to respect it, to store up strength for "really artistic works," and prophesied for him a great future.

We know that Chekhov accepted any kindness as something unaccustomed, we know, too, his feeling of loneliness and his more than humble conception of the importance of his writing. And now a universally acknowledged author had suddenly sent a letter of fatherly kindness to a hack writer of "fragments" and "entertainments," with no aspirations towards great literature. It is easy to understand that the letter produced an enormous impression on Chekhov.

"Your letter, my dear, my beloved Heavenly Messenger," he replied to Grigorovich, "came upon me like a bolt from the blue. I was so profoundly moved that I almost cried, and I feel sure it has left deep traces in my

heart. . . . I go about as in a trance. I am unable to judge if this high reward is deserved by me or not. I can only repeat that it simply took my breath away.

"If I have a gift worthy of respect, I repent before the purity of your heart, for so far I have not respected it. I felt I had it, but I never thought it was worth anything. Purely external reasons will sometimes make one unfair to oneself, and cause extreme mistrustfulness and suspiciousness. And now I come to think of it there are plenty of reasons in my own case. All those near to me have always adopted a condescending attitude to me as an author, and have never been tired of advising me in a friendly way not to give up my real occupation for mere scribbling. I have hundreds of acquaintances in Moscow, among whom are a score or so of writers, and I cannot recall to mind a single one who reads me or considers me an artist. . . . During my five years of haunting newspaper offices, I have become saturated with this universal view of my unimportance as a writer, and quickly learned to regard my work condescendingly and—dash off my stories. That is the first reason. . . . The second is that I am a doctor and up to my ears in my profession, and the saying about falling between two stools has never cost anyone so much sleep as it has me.

"I only write all this to try and excuse my grievous sin a little in your eyes. Up till now I have been extremely frivolous and careless about my literary work. . . . While writing I have done all I could not to spread myself on the characters and scenes which mean the most to me and which, God knows why, I have preserved and concealed assiduously."

In reply to Grigorovich's appeal to him to throw up pot-boiling and starve rather than spend his talent on trifling humorous stuff, Anton Pavlovich writes:

"I wouldn't mind starving, for I have done it before, but it isn't a matter of myself." He did not tell Grigoro-

vich that he was the only bread-winner in a big family which he could not bring himself to doom to starvation.

Chekhov is utterly ruthless to himself in this letter, now, as always, severe and harsh in his self-appraisal. Knowing this trait in him we must adopt a critical attitude to his uncompromising self-criticism. We must not forget that he was already the author of immortal classical works and that a feeling of responsibility for his writing had begun to mature in him before he got Grigorovich's letter.

Grigorovich's letter came at a time when Chekhov had already begun to feel the imminence of a fresh upsurging of his creative talent. Perhaps the most important part of his reply to Grigorovich lies in the admission that he had unconsciously preserved the images and pictures dearest to him for some future time. He was aware of new creative potentialities in himself. The letter elucidated what he had already himself begun to feel, and inspired him with faith in his own powers.

The first mature Chekhov stories in which the comic element no longer played a dominating role had begun to appear as early as 1885. From the year 1887 Chekhov very seldom returned to his early vein of unredeemed humour. Humour begins to play a new role in his works —either intensifying or throwing into still greater relief what is tragic, or, on the contrary, "softening" tragedy with a wise, bright smile.

Chekhov's talent had entered upon that period of fullness, integrity in its development in which the comic element no longer existed independently in his works, but was subordinated to the presentation of life as a whole in all its complexity.

Of course this is also true of the works of the first period. At that time, however, the author regarded himself first and foremost as a humourist, as Antosha Chekhontey. Now he had already quite consciously set him-

self the task of presenting life in all the wealth of its colours and manifestations. Thus Antosha Chekhontey was transformed into Chekhov.

But even if this turning-point in his creative work had not taken place, even if we could imagine that he had for some reason or other stopped writing after the first five years of his literary career, we should nevertheless be forced to acknowledge that a great artist, a remarkable satirist had made his appearance in Russian literature and left the scene early. And if we could imagine that Chekhov had never made himself felt in the sphere of satire, and had only revealed his talent in that of light, carefree humour, it would still have to be acknowledged that Russian literature had given the world a first-class humourist. Bunin rightly declared that even if Chekhov had "written nothing but *Premature Death of a Horse* or *The Love-Story of a Double-Bass Player*, it would still be possible to say that a wonderful mind had blazed up for a moment and disappeared in Russian literature, for only highly intelligent people are capable of inventing and relating a good absurdity, a good joke, only those whose very veins are permeated by their intellect."

But by great good luck for Russian literature the extraordinary wit and talent of Chekhov conquered ever new creative heights, never content with what was attained, always tackling new and more important problems.

One of the first and perfectly mature stories in the new Chekhov cycle was *Woe* (1885). This brief tale makes the same impression on the reader that the reading or acting of a real tragedy would.

"Turner Grigory Petrov, who had a well-established reputation both as a splendid craftsman and the most hardened drunkard and ne'er-do-well in the whole Galchino District, was taking his sick wife to the Zemstvo hospital."

In his imagination he saw himself taking his wife to the hospital, telling the doctor how he would make a present in gratitude for the treatment of his old woman—a fine cigarette-case of speckled birch.

Snowy mist, blizzard, the impassable road.

He had lived with his Matryona forty years, and now they seemed to have passed in a kind of drunken stupor, in want, fighting and quarrelling....

And he wanted to tell his old woman that he was not really what he had seemed all these forty years, that he pitied her and loved her, that nobody else was so dear to him. But it was too late, too late! The snow on her face no longer melted.

"And the turner wept.... How quickly things happen in this life, he thought to himself. His grief had hardly begun, and now all was over. He had hardly begun to live with his old woman, to speak his heart to her, to cherish her, when she died....

" 'If one could only start life over again...' thought the turner."

He turned back, his painful meditations relapsing into a dream. And when he woke up he was in the hospital, and the doctor was saying to him:

" 'Say good-bye to your hands and feet.... They're frozen. Come, come, what are you crying for? You've had your life, and thank God for it! I suppose you're over sixty, you've had your day.'

" 'Woe! Woe, Your Honour! Forgive me! If I could only live another six years!'

" 'What for?'

" 'It wasn't my horse. I shall have to give it back.... I shall have to bury my old woman. Oh, how quickly everything happens in this world! Your Honour! Pavel Ivanich! A cigarette-case of the best speckled birch! I'll make you a croquet-set....'

"The doctor went out of the room with a wave of his hand. All over with the turner."

In this miniature story the entire life of a human being passes before our eyes as in a full-length novel. And how quickly it is all over! The turner never even noticed it pass.

"How quickly everything happens in this world!" The tragic significance of the whole story is summed up in this single phrase.

The author shows us with the irresistible, terrible power of simplicity the inexorability of fate, a ruthless series of events interrupting the even tenor of everyday life. It is this incursion of catastrophical changes on the routine of life which makes the story artistic, constituting its poetical essence. It is the point at which humour and tragedy are blended into one.

The horse trudges on towards the hospital automatically, though the old woman is dead. The turner's thoughts go on, still centred, automatically as it were, on the cigarette-case he means to make for the doctor from speckled birch, though his wife is dead and his hands are frost-bitten.

There are two catastrophes in this little tale—the death of the old woman and the sudden crippling of the turner. That fatal rapidity of the course of events is hightened for the reader by the fact that the turner, while still suffering from the effects of the first catastrophe, still unable to accustom himself to it, is overtaken by yet another.

Palmin, with his delicate poetic intuition, wrote to the author about *Woe* as follows: "I think this the best thing you have ever written. This story, so full of truth to life, leaves a strange impression—one is both amused and sad. As in the life of the people, the comic is interwoven with the sombre."

The interweaving, or rather the complete fusion of humour and tragedy in Chekhov's work, is brought about so imperceptibly, with such natural simplicity, that one does not know whether to laugh or cry. This later became the main distinguishing feature of his plays, and producers of Chekhov's plays for long—right up to our time, and of course long after—will cudgel their brains over the question: is it a comedy or a tragedy? not knowing whether to laugh or to cry.

That is why Chekhov treated the definition of the genre of his plays so lightly. He called *The Sea-gull*, in which there is so much that is tragic, a comedy, and *The Three Sisters*, which he alluded to now as a comedy, now even as a vaudeville, he called a drama. Chekhov worked out an aesthetic principle according to which the tragic and the comic are divided by no wall, but merely represent the two sides of one and the same phenomenon of life, which has its tragic and its comic sides. Any phenomenon, from Chekhov's point of view, can be regarded simultaneously in a tragic and in a comic aspect.

In the stories which appeared in 1885 Chekhov was already giving clear evidence of the inimitable innovations in style introduced by him, notably and with particular power in the mature period of his work. The second period of Chekhov's literary work was marked from the very beginning by the writer's rejection of any emphasis on the predominating comic or humorous side of life under presentation. Chekhov felt still more acutely the tragic, as well as the humorous side of those conflicting aspects of reality described by him, the way in which both sides were interwoven and mutually dependent. The story *Woe* sprang from his awareness of this.

Returning to the dialogue between the turner and the doctor, quoted above. Without your noticing it, from a mere talk between patient and doctor, it has become

a talk between man and his fate. Think what it is that the turner asks the doctor for! He begs him to graciously pardon all the errors of his life, to give him another five or six years to live and to work. And the doctor, who has been transformed into Fate, asks him: "What for?" as if he could, if he would, satisfy the man's request—give him back the spent years of his life. And the participants in this strange conversation never doubt the doctor's right to forgive or not to forgive, to return or not to return the spent years. When you think it all over a smile no doubt will appear on your lips. But has this smile anything to do with amusement?

Such is the tragic humour of Chekhov.

Chekhov invariably insinuates what is strange and unusual with remarkable simplicity, "unannounced," without the slightest emphasis, without altering the intonation of the story about ordinary, everyday events. "For that is what life itself is like!" he seems to be saying. It, too, insinuates into our everyday life what is strange or terrible without emphasis, "unannounced," alas!—without the slightest warning, so that at first we do not notice that something has happened which breaks up life's rhythm, which destroys the habitual.

Just as simply, as unnoticeably, irreparable grief had come upon the turner without warning.

Never before in literature had there been anything like this wealth in a miniature tale, fraught with such immense philosophical, psychological, artistic content, in which the tragic and the comic are blended, in which the reader is forced to ponder over life, human beings, ourselves! All must feel, when reading *Woe*, an irresistible impulse to say to themselves and their friends: "Let us meditate on the fact, 'how quickly everything happens in this world!'... Yes, life is not endless, as it seems to be in youth. Make haste to do everything bright and humane for people while you can, or you will be like the poor

turner, who had no time to do that which would have beautified his life, made it more human."

The searching analysis made by the artist Repin of *Ward No. 6*, one of the ripest creations of Chekhov's genius, may be applied to *Woe*, this almost youthful story which is yet so permeated with wisdom.

"What a terrific grip this story exercises!" the great painter wrote to the author. "It is quite hard to understand how, from such a simple, unpretentious story with hardly any plot, there rises such an overwhelming, profound, stupendous image of humanity. You are a giant!"

Thus Chekhov used his remarkable skill in raising the unpretending prose of everyday life, the simplest plot, to the level of the universal, touching upon the principal, the most deep-rooted problems of human life.

No less remarkable is *Heartsick*, the tale of Yona, the old Petersburg cabby, whose son had died and who had no one he could talk to about it. All his attempts to confide in the nocturnal revellers who were his fares, in the yardman, in the young cab-driver, are beaten off by the wall of human indifference. And the old man must unburden himself! This necessity of his is conveyed with the utmost power. You can feel almost physically the grief which fills his being to overflowing, to breaking point. In the end Yona tells his horse his grief.

" '... Supposing, now, you had a foal, and you were own mother to that foal.... And supposing suddenly that little foal were to die.... You'd be sorry, wouldn't you?'

"The horse chews, listens, breathes on its master's hands....

"Yona warms up and tells it everything."

The atmosphere here is different from that of *Woe*. Here is no violent catastrophe, no inexorable fate. The end evokes a sad, gentle smile. While in *Woe* humour heightens the tragedy of the subject, in *Heartsick* humour, on the contrary, softens the tragedy, giving the story,

with its night landscape and gentle grief, a musical quality, like a kind of nocturne.

Like no one else in world literature, Chekhov revealed the wealth, the infinite variety of the subtlest shades of humour, that loftiest and wisest quality of the human soul. Chekhov's humour is profoundly national—in its gentleness, austerity and breadth is reflected the soul of the Russian.

This humour is inspired by the profound, inexhaustible Chekhov love for the "little people," such as turner Grigory Petrov or the lonely old cabby....

In 1886 Chekhov produced such remarkable works as *Anyuta*, *Agafya*, *Nightmare*, *Turmoil*, *A Gentleman Acquaintance*, *Chorus Girl*, *The Teacher*, *In the Law Courts*, followed in 1887 by *Antagonists*, *Polinka*, *Ignorance*, *Verochka*, *Volodya* and *Happiness*.

The young writer's range of subject was becoming more and more extensive. This was to a great extent due to the fact that, having graduated in 1884 from the University, Anton Pavlovich visited what was then the town of Voskresensk (now Istra) near Moscow, where his brother Ivan had found a post as teacher in the parish school. Anton Pavlovich and his family began to spend every summer in the vicinity of Voskresensk till the year 1887, renting a summer dwelling on the Kiselyovs' estate of Babkino. Kiselyova was a writer of books for children.

Voskresensk and Babkino played a great role in the life of Chekhov. Here he developed that love for the scenery of Central Russia which made him such a brilliant describer of the Russian countryside. And here he made the acquaintance of people of all sorts of callings and professions. A whole new world opened before him—the life of the peasants, of Zemstvo doctors, of landed proprietors, civil servants, teachers, officers. He eagerly studied and investigated reality, and by no means in the capacity of an outside observer. Anton Pavlovich was

for some time the head of the Zvenigorod Zemstvo hospital not far from Voskresensk and received patients in the Chikino Zemstvo hospital, a mile or so from Voskresensk. The Zemstvo doctor was in close touch with the life of the peasants. The drama and tragedy of the life of the Russian village in those days, without a profound knowledge of which he could never have written a story such as *Woe*, unfolded themselves before the eyes of Chekhov. But for his Voskresensk and Zvenigorod experience he could not have written such stories as *Surgery*, *The Truant*, *Unpleasant Episode*, and many another tale revolving around the figure of the doctor and the hospital. He could never have written without this real-life experience of his a story of such subtle poetry as *The Kiss*, or his play *The Three Sisters*. Both these works required knowledge of the life of officers.

There was an artillery battery in the vicinity of Voskresensk under the command of Colonel Mayevsky, an intelligent, lively and sociable officer. Chekhov was on the friendliest terms with him and his family.

At Zvenigorod Anton Pavlovich Chekhov zealously attended the meetings of the District Law Courts, appeared in court as an expert witness, was present at post-mortems (the stories *The Dead Body* and *At the Post-Mortem* may be recalled).

At Babkino Chekhov made friends with the famous Russian painter Levitan, who lived not far away and was as passionately fond of the countryside around Moscow as Chekhov himself.

The years spent at Babkino and Voskresensk were fruitful for the literary and social development of Chekhov. The Chikino Zemstvo hospital, where Chekhov received patients, was under the management of the then celebrated Zemstvo doctor P. A. Arkhangelsky, who was always surrounded by youthful medicos, some of whom subsequently became famous. After the day's work was

over these young men would often gather at the rooms of the bachelor Arkhangelsky, holding parties at which, as the writer's brother Mikhail Pavlovich Chekhov recalls, "there was a lot of liberal talk, and the best works of contemporary fiction and scientific literature were discussed. The name of Saltykov-Shchedrin was heard constantly—people simply raved over him. Turgenev was read and reread."

Mikhail Pavlovich Chekhov merely contributes this valuable stroke of the brush in passing, without attaching any special significance to it. But the atmosphere of enthusiasm for Shchedrin, of freedom-loving ("liberal," as he puts it) conversation, could not have been without its effect on Anton Pavlovich. Saltykov-Shchedrin and Turgenev were close to Chekhov at the very outset of his literary career.

In these years Anton Pavlovich finally saw that his vocation was literature, and not medicine. While he realized that he had talent it was not fame of which he thought. He was appalled by the thought that, possessing the gift of influencing human souls, he might do them enormous good or enormous harm. *At Home* (1887) is the story of an attorney who ponders over the theme: "How little intelligence, truth and certainty there still is even in activities so fraught with potentiality as education, law, literature. . . ."

These are the ponderings of the writer himself, his feeling of responsibility to the reader for his talent. By the words "intelligence, truth, certainty" Chekhov meant the clear, well thought-out, precise aim of creative work, the artist's standpoint, the idea in the spirit of which the writer must educate his readers. Thus began his painstaking work on the forging of a standpoint, the anguished search for a general idea.

Chekhov went ever deeper into life, and his skill developed more and more.

Anton Pavlovich spent the autumn and winter in Moscow, occasionally visiting Petersburg. This enabled him to become not merely the exponent of the life in a provincial town, in a village, on a country estate, but also the exponent of the life in a great city.

In his reserved manner, apparently so calm and impartial, Chekhov exposes the gloomy, appalling aspects of life in a great town, the carefully concealed abscesses. It is remarkable how he manages to preserve poetry, melody, and, to use a word Chekhov was fond of, *grace*, even while portraying the coarsest, the basest aspects of life in a bourgeois town.

In *The Fit* Chekhov describes life in Moscow brothels in the spirit of penetrating, impartial, perfectly objective research. In *Crime and Punishment* Dostoyevsky devoted pages which have become famous to the horrors of prostitution. But it was the general sufferings, the degradation of humanity, rather than this particular scourge of humanity, which caused him anguish. The reader of Dostoyevsky is made to feel, not so much the nightmare of prostitution, as the ocean of human tears, the sufferings of the whole of humanity. Prostitution is not identified in the reader's mind with the image of Sonya Marmeladova. Chekhov is specific. He investigates a given aspect of reality. He describes a calm, accustomed mechanism, the everyday tedium of life in a brothel. "Sin" presents itself in its dull, everyday form. And it is precisely this presentation which shows it to be so appalling. It was precisely the prosaicness, the calm, which shock the hero of the story, the student Vassilyev, in whose image Chekhov created a portrait of the writer Garshin, with his exceptional sensitiveness to pain and suffering. (*The Fit* was intended by the author for an anthology in memory of Garshin.) The most striking passage in the story is the description of the special brothel "style" (Vassilyev had gone with student friends from one brothel to an-

other)—a kind of indescribable deadly vulgarity which is the same in all the brothels, especially their flamboyant "taste," something stolid and rigid. "Inspecting the furniture and dresses, Vassilyev began to realize that this was not just lack of taste, but something that might almost be called the taste and even the style of S. Street, something not to be found anywhere else, something complete in its hideousness, not just something which had sprung up spontaneously.... He realized everything was precisely as it was intended to be, that if a single one of the women had been pleasingly dressed, if there had been a single passable picture on the walls, the tone of the whole street would have suffered." In other words, if anything in the slightest degree human had found its way here, where everything human had been trampled underfoot, where everything that stands for human dignity, individuality, for the image and likeness of God, had been desecrated through and through, such an incursion of humanity would have been in itself a kind of bad style, something glaringly irrelevant, a gross insult, almost cynical. Here everything must be special, repulsively hideous, vulgar, obtuse, there must be nothing to remind you of the human being. And yet the human, the beautiful exists too! Over all the loathsome filth which is shown in the story floats the vision, pure, delicate, melodious, of the first snow—white, new, light as down. " 'How can the snow fall in a street like this!' wonders Vassilyev. 'A curse on these houses!' "

The vision of the first snow, symbol of the fresh pure beauty of life, reminds us how beautiful life might be, it serves to set off the impenetrable gloom of the shameful crime against individuals and against humanity. Like a musical theme with variations, the snow motif appears at the beginning and the conclusion of the story.

Some students were walking along Tverskoi Boulevard late one evening. One of them, an artist, a student

of the School of Painting and Sculpture, hums an air from *The Mermaid*—"Unwittingly towards those mournful shores," and up comes the leit-motif of the snow. "A feeling as fresh as the new, downy, white snow"—such is the poetic atmosphere at the beginning of the story. Vassilyev "liked the snow ... the pale light of the street-lamps, the clear-cut black foot-marks left on the new snow by the feet of the passers-by. He liked the feeling in the air, especially that transparent, tender, innocent, almost virginal tint to be seen in nature only twice in the year —when all is covered with snow, or on bright days or moonlit nights in early spring, when the ice breaks on the river." But soon the pure, bright atmosphere becomes dismal, angry, becomes one of grief for the unbearable desecration of life. The "transparent, tender, innocent, almost virginal tint" is desecrated. In *The Fit*, one of the most characteristic traits of the whole of Chekhov's poetical equipment makes itself felt—the place of landscape in his works.

For Chekhov, landscape is always a reminder of how beautiful the life of human beings could and should be; it is condemnation of the distortion and squalor of life; it is by means of landscape that Chekhov passes judgement on life as it is, asserting the beauty of life as it should be, when beauty at last triumphs; there is reproach and grief and sadness and hope in his landscapes. In the works of Chekhov landscape is frequently contrasted with human life, with its distortion, but this contrast never belittles man, never sets his "transitory nature," his insignificance, against the sublime unconcern and beauty of nature. Chekhov's landscape always serves to remind us of the beauty ever-present in man, even though repressed and stifled, of the beauty that is bound to triumph in the end.

Many other most important features of Chekhov's work are displayed in this story, among them the most impor-

tant of all—the conception of his hero's moral countenance: a feeling of personal responsibility for all that is terrible and degrading in life, a striving to solve not merely its petty private problems, but fundamental social problems, aspirations towards serious social activity for the bringing about of radical change, and at the same time a bitter realization of his own weakness, his inability to answer the one question—"What ought I to do?" This realization drives Chekhov's heroes to despair, to madness almost, even to suicide, the state to which Vassilyev is reduced. The inability to find an answer to the question: "What ought I to do?", the tormenting realization of the lack of any "general idea" which might serve as a guide in actual life, directing her activities and showing her the meaning of life, reduce Katya, the heroine of *Dull Story*, to the same state, drive Zenaida Fyodorovna, the heroine of *The Story of an Unknown Man*, to suicide.

Vassilyev feels a personal obligation to solve the accursed problem. "For some reason it seemed to him that he had to solve the problem that very moment, at all costs, that this problem was one which concerned himself, and not others. He rallied all his forces in the effort to overcome his sense of despair, seated himself on the side of the bed with his head in his hands, and began thinking of some way to save all those women he had seen that day." After having gone through all the solutions which came to his mind he was obliged to admit the bitter realization that all these solutions were futile, that they were in fact no solutions. Even supposing he were to marry one of those prostitutes himself—what was to be done about the remaining hundreds of thousands? He then began thinking of preaching, of becoming a sort of apostle, but, he mused, "real apostles do not restrict themselves to preaching, they act," and what ought he to do? What? That was just what Vassilyev did not know.

He belonged to the sort of people to whom social ills, insults to humanity, were a matter of personal pain and anguish. When speaking of the characteristic traits of the hero of *The Fit*, Chekhov introduces a remarkable conception of what he calls *the human gift*:

"One of his friends remarked that Vassilyev was a gifted man. There is the literary, the histrionic, the artistic gift, but his was a peculiar gift, the *human* gift. He had a wonderfully developed sense of pain. Just as a good actor reflects other people's gestures and intonations, so does Vassilyev reflect other men's pain. The sight of tears makes him weep; at a sick person's bedside he becomes a sick man himself and begins moaning; if he witnesses violence, he feels as if the violence were being offered to himself, and though in his heart he is as frightened as a child, he rushes to the rescue. Pain felt by others at once irritates and excites him, rousing him to a state of frenzy."

Chekhov himself was highly endowed with this human gift, and that was why he was so good both as a writer and a doctor. It is worthy of notice that in his capacity as doctor Chekhov insisted on the necessity of profound study not only of the objective symptoms of the disease, but of the subjective state of patients, their thoughts, emotions, spiritual experience. This was the point where Chekhov the author came into contact with Chekhov the doctor. Vassilyev is a typical Chekhov character, and at the same time he is—as Chekhov himself pointed out—a person of the Garshin type. This type, Chekhov wrote in one of his letters, is one with which he could profoundly sympathize. People belonging to it were very much akin to Anton Pavlovich himself. He felt the human gift both in Garshin and in his characters. And yet there is a definite boundary-line between Chekhov and people of the Garshin type. Chekhov realized that however worthy, attractive and high-minded those people might be, they

could never be leaders of men and were incapable of standing up against terrible reality, and that the answer to the most important question—what should be done to change reality?—was not to be expected in this quarter. They were *weak*. The hero of Garshin's *Crimson Flower* who has absorbed all the pain of humanity is no doubt an excellent character, but the idea that evil must be exterminated had become an obsession with him, incapacitating him for actual struggle for the attainment of his ideal. Chekhov seeks for characters in whom sympathy with suffering leads to action. He was not however destined to find them in actual life. In this connection it is interesting to remark a characteristic feature of Chekhov's attitude towards his favourite heroes. Combined with shy, wistful affection for them, there is always a note of depreciation, scepticism, accompanied by a rueful smile evoked by the realization that, appealing as these people are, it is not for them to change the order of things. The end of *The Fit* is almost languid. All the painful struggles and sufferings of Vassilyev end in the doctor prescribing bromides and morphine for him. He had taken these before.

"He stood on the pavement for a while, wrapped in thought, then, bidding his friends good-bye, strolled languidly in the direction of the University."

Nothing has been solved, everything remains as it was before, and always will remain thus, and Vassilyev felt "ashamed" of his fit of sympathetic enthusiasm, which had changed nothing and could lead to nothing. What was to be done to put an end to the disgraceful outrage against human dignity? The question remains unanswered, and the ending of the story is "vague." But there is a good deal of clarity in this "vagueness." A scathing, inexorable judgement on reality has been pronounced, not permitting the slightest reconciliation to it. The message underlying the story is the invocation to seek, at whatever

cost, a solution of the accursed problems, a path of action. Blessed are the sufferings of Vassilyev, blessed are all they who possess the *human gift*. True, they are not the ones destined to strike at the terrible order of things, to find the solution. But their sufferings, their quest for the right answers, their aspirations to action, their bitter realization of the futility of petty, personal solutions, have all contributed to the historical process of the preparation and working out of the great, radical solutions of all painful social problems. And while there is nothing about the students, Vassilyev's comrades, average representatives of their time, it may confidently be asserted of people like Vassilyev himself, who impinged upon human suffering with a naked conscience, loving humanity with no abstract, "theoretical" love, but with an active, poignant love, prepared for effective achievements, quite unlike the sentimental worship of human suffering of the Dostoyevsky school!—of such people as the gifted hero of *The Fit* an affirmative reply may be given to the question put by Astrov (*Uncle Vanya*): "...Will those who live a hundred years, two hundred years hence, for whom we are now clearing the path, have a kind word for us?"

As regards the form itself of *The Fit*, we can only say that no one but Chekhov could combine in one picture the coarsest sides of life, its dark corners with true poetry and music.

Chekhov wrote to the poet Pleshcheyev about *The Fit*: "The story is quite unsuitable for the fireside, it is inelegant and reeks of the drain-pipe."

But he was unjust to his own story. Like *Heartsick*, *The Fit*, with its poetical picture of the town at night, its refrain of the vision of first snow, is profoundly musical. One cannot help recalling in this connection Mayakovsky's: "Could you play a nocturne with a drain-pipe for a flute?"

It is no mere chance association, this of Mayakovsky and Chekhov. Both writers (we refer to the early, pre-revolutionary period in the case of Mayakovsky) are poets of the man in the street, introducing the rude facts of life into their writing, which "reek of the drain-pipe." Both were innovators, conscious that their work differed from aristocratic and bourgeois literature. True, in the case of Chekhov, it is the melancholy, rueful theme which prevails, whereas the prevailing mood of early Mayakovsky is that of rebellion. But it was not for nothing that the rebellious young Mayakovsky studied Chekhov with such care, even devoting an article to him, in which he likened his own works to those of Chekhov.

Undoubtedly, Anton Pavlovich felt the novelty and "grossness" of his subject-matter and themes in comparison with the traditions of Turgenev's prose and all that literature we are accustomed to call "aristocratic." By this word we do not mean that the literature thus classified defended the narrow interests of the aristocracy, but that it developed on the estates of landowners, in the "nests of gentlefolk."

Chekhov knew that by introducing "the drain-pipe" into his writing he was defying the traditions and canons of that literature. His attitude to the prose of Turgenev was extremely complex. He admired it and at the same time argued with Turgenev. It is quite impossible to imagine Turgenev treating some of Chekhov's "low" themes and subjects. Chekhov was attracted by the musical, poetical, elegant qualities of Turgenev's writing. But in his own work he combined the musical, poetical and graceful element with new, "plebeian," "gross" material.

At the beginning of this new period Chekhov seems to deliberately emphasize, in the very titles of his stories—*Woe*, *Heartsick*—the contrasting nature of his new themes with the apparently carefree, high-spirited humour of the Antosha Chekhontey period. It is as if the artist were

testing his powers in the dramatic and tragic—a field new to him (though, of course, its newness is only comparative, for, as we know, the humour of Antosha Chekhontey was not alien to melancholy, grief, longings and heartaches!). In his maturer works, however, we do not find him stressing any particular poetical mood; the sombre and lighter sides of life will henceforth be inextricably interwoven in his writing.

Though no longer signing himself Antosha Chekhontey, Chekhov had no idea of renouncing the artistic achievements attained by him during his *Oskolki* period. He remained faithful to the technique he had worked out for himself. Not only is the motto "Brevity is the sister of talent" not relinquished, it assumes still greater importance in the master's eyes. His writing becomes more and more compact, and the undercurrent of his works deeper, and at the same time his style gains in clarity and lucidity.

Chekhov introduced a new treatment of landscape in literature, abandoning Turgenev's method of giving a full, detailed description and substituting it by a single characteristic, salient detail. This principle he expounded in a letter to his brother Alexander, in which he tells him that it is enough to mention the gleam on the neck of a broken bottle on the dam, and the black shadow cast by the wheel of the water-mill, to give a picture of a moonlit night. That was precisely how he described a moonlit night in his story *The Wolf*. In the play *The Sea-gull*, the young writer Treplev, jealous of the experienced Trigorin, says: "Trigorin has worked out a certain technique of writing; writing comes easy to him.... He makes the neck of a broken bottle gleam and the wheel of a water-mill cast a dark shadow, and there's a moonlit night for you...."

Chekhov rejected the traditional method of introducing the characters by giving their whole life story, and that

of their parents, and sometimes even ancestors, before making the characters themselves act. Chekhov's characters always reveal themselves in action, or at least in thoughts and sentiments immediately connected with action. Chekhov is one of the strictest exponents of the objective school in literature, basing his study of human beings on their behaviour.

Thus he became the creator of a new style. And yet, though he was a true innovator and must have realized that he was introducing something entirely new into literature, Chekhov took an extremely modest view of his own importance as a writer.

When the Academy of Science, in 1888, awarded him a half-share in the Pushkin Prize for a book of stories which had been sent to the Academy without the author's knowledge, Chekhov answered a congratulatory letter from Lazarev-Gruzinsky, a fellow-writer, as follows:

"Certainly this award is a great thing, and not for me alone. I am happy to have cleared the way to the 'heavies' for many others, and am doubly happy because, owing to me, these others may now hope for Academic laurels. All that I have written will be forgotten in five or ten years; but the paths I have traced will remain, and in this lies my only merit."

He saw his only merit in the fact that he had been able to make the serious literary monthlies open their pages to the "plebeian" type of miniature story. Before Chekhov the literary monthlies regarded such stories with contempt, considering them frivolous and unliterary, identifying them with "Leikinism." Chekhov is certainly right in pointing out his merit in this respect. But this was only the outward expression of the much greater service he rendered the cause of Russian and world literature in giving to the miniature story the prestige of full-size literary compositions, of the great epics of Russian life.

Chekhov had become the best exponent of the plebeian, democratic Russian intelligentsia, which had sprung up and developed together with the rapidly increasing development of capitalism in Russia. Both the weakness and the strength of this new class of intellectuals are reflected in his works—on the one hand, their truly democratic tendencies, their aversion to parasitism, their unwillingness to serve the interests of a society made up of property-owners, the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie, their mistrust of upper-class, bourgeois liberalism; on the other hand, the remoteness from the path of revolution, so typical of petty-bourgeois intellectuals, which inevitably brought them under the influence of abstract humane theories and liberal prejudices.

But while he reflected these shortcomings of the intellectuals of his time, Chekhov was in many ways ahead of them in his ideas. Gorky's remark that "the old Russian writers were more broad-minded than the intelligentsia of their day and were head and shoulders above the political theories accepted by the latter," can be fully applied to Chekhov.

HIS FRIENDS AND FOES

As Chekhov's artistic skill matured, the image of his favourite character—the ordinary, simple Russian, to whom Chekhov dedicated his life and his work, and to whom he felt such a profound responsibility to the end of his life—assumed ever greater depth.

The moral, social, democratic spirit of Chekhov's work was often concealed beneath a bright, carefree humour, sometimes lighthearted on the surface, or (as in the stories of the later period) beneath the carefully contrived Chekhov manner of ostensibly impartial, strictly objective narrative.

But in every line, in every word, beneath this layer of reserve and objectivity, the author's passionate love for the working man and contempt for his enemies—vulgarity, idleness, parasitism—are clearly shown.

An analysis of *Antagonists*, a story written in 1887, will help us to form an idea of the essence of Chekhov's artistic methods and to discover the type of individual he considers his friend and makes his favourite character, and the type which was a foe in his eyes.

This story shows the grief of the Zemstvo doctor Kirilov, and that of a gentleman Abogin. The point of intersection of the two misfortunes constitutes the dramatic interest of the story.

The forty-four-year-old Kirilov's only child, a boy of six, has just died of diphtheria.

Abogin's wife has run away with a lover. Simulating dangerous illness, she sent her husband for a doctor and in the meantime left her home.

Kirilov is dumbfounded, stunned by his grief. All his thoughts and movements are mechanical; he is unable to think or speak.

When Abogin suddenly appears at Kirilov's door, imploring the latter to go with him to his estate—miles distant—to save his "dying" wife, Kirilov does not at first understand what the man is talking about. Then he tells Abogin he cannot possibly go, for he has just lost his child and cannot leave his sick wife alone in the house. But Abogin implores him to "display heroism." At last Kirilov agrees. When they arrive at the country-house, Madame Abogin's perfidy is discovered.

The deceived husband is astounded.

"How base! How shabby!" he cries out. "Satan himself, you would think, could not have invented anything more revolting. Sent me away so that she could run off, run away with that jackanapes, that dull wag, that pimp! Oh, God, I would rather she had died! I shall never get over it! Never!"

Kirilov, who up till then had been in a kind of trance, discovers that no one takes him to the bedside, and suddenly, as if from afar, the meaning of Abogin's words dawns upon him. Slowly, gradually, Kirilov comes out of his torpor.

"The doctor drew himself up. He blinked, his eyes filled with tears....

" 'Excuse me—what is the meaning of all this?' he asked, looking round curiously. 'My child has died, my wife is overcome with grief, alone in the house.... I can hardly stand myself, I haven't slept for three nights ... and what do I find? I have been made to play a part in some vulgar farce, to act as a kind of stage property. I—I don't understand.' "

But Abogin does not hear Kirilov, he goes on wailing, calling himself a fool, initiates the doctor into the secrets of his love, till Kirilov at last comes out of his trance. He feels he has been profoundly, grossly insulted.

" 'Why are you telling me all this? I am not interested. I will not listen to you!' Here he began to shout, banging on the table with his fist. 'I don't need your trivial secrets, damn them! Don't dare to speak to me about such trash! Perhaps you think I haven't been sufficiently insulted yet? You consider me a servant whom you can insult with impunity! Is that it?'

"Abogin backed away from Kirilov and stared at him in amazement.

" 'What did you bring me here for?' continued the doctor, his beard wagging. 'You married for want of something better to do, you can play out your melodrama for the same reason, but what's it to do with me? What have I to do with your love affairs? Leave me in peace! Go in for gentlemanly fisticuffs, show off your humane ideals, play—' (here the doctor shot a glance at the 'cello-case), 'play your double-bass and trombone, stuff yourself like a gelded cockerel, but don't dare to trifle with human beings. If you can't respect them, leave them alone!'

" 'Excuse me, but what does all this mean?' said Abogin, his face flushing."

It is now Abogin's turn to emerge from the state in which people can see nothing but their own grief.

" 'It means that it is base and ignoble to play with people like this. I'm a doctor, you consider doctors, and all workers who do not smell of eau-de-Cologne and prostitution, your lackeys, people of *mauvais ton.* Do so, if you like, but you have no right to use a suffering man as stage property. . . .'

" 'You must be mad!' cried Abogin. 'How ungenerous! I am profoundly unhappy myself, and . . . and. . . .'

"'Unhappy!' echoed the doctor scornfully. 'Don't use that word, it has no application to you. Rotters, who cannot meet their bills, also call themselves unhappy. A cockerel, suffering from adiposity, is unhappy, too....'

"Abogin and the doctor confronted one another, furiously exchanging unmerited insults. They had probably never in their lives, even in delirium, uttered so many unjust, cruel and absurd remarks."

It would seem on the surface that we have here a perfectly impartial story about two civilized human beings, overwhelmed by grief, which makes men selfish and incapable of understanding one another, causing them to insult each other unfairly and outrageously. The situation of both parties is apparently alike, both have weighty and equally natural causes for their grief. As a matter of fact it is Kirilov who behaves with greater unfairness in the ugly squabble. He has no grounds for accusing Abogin of bringing him here merely to take part in a vulgar comedy. In going for the doctor, Abogin had sincerely believed his wife to be dangerously ill.

And yet all this is on the surface, it is the top layer of the story, and Kirilov's obvious unreasonableness and injustice are unreasonable and unjust only on the surface.

The real depth, the poetical essence of the story can only be discovered by careful analysis of the fine particles of poetry which constitute the artistic whole, and which, when fused, create a work of art. It becomes clear when the two pictures of grief are placed side by side. Here is the picture of Kirilov's grief:

"The repellence and horror associated with the idea of death were lacking in the bedroom. In the prevailing paralysis, the mother's pose, the indifference stamped on the features of the father, there was something almost attractive, something touching, that subtle, imperceptible beauty of human grief, which people will not quickly learn to understand, still less to describe, and which,

probably, can only be conveyed by music. And there was beauty in the sombre stillness. Kirilov and his wife said nothing, did not weep, as if, in addition to the burden of their grief, they felt the poetry of their situation. Just as in its time their youth had passed, their right to have children had vanished for ever with this boy. The doctor was forty-four years old, he was already grey, and looked an old man. His faded, delicate wife was thirty-five. Andrei was not merely their only child, he was their last."

And here is the picture of Abogin's grief. After discovering his wife's elopement, he goes back to the drawing-room where he had left Kirilov waiting to be taken to the patient.

"Abogin was standing in the doorway, but he was not the same man who had gone out of the room. His look of nourishment and refined elegance had deserted him, his face, hands, and pose were stamped with a repulsive air of something which was neither exactly horror, nor physical distress."

There is no beauty, no poetry in Abogin's grief. Music has nothing to do with a grief like this. The very fact of Abogin's being musical seems to lend an ironic note.

It is clear that Kirilov's words about Abogin having no right to be unhappy, because a cockerel suffering from obesity is "unhappy," too—these words must be the expression of the author's profoundest, most cherished thoughts. The artist in him is wholly on the side of Kirilov.

The *beauty* of human feelings is reserved for Kirilov. As for Abogin, grief had merely stamped him "with a repulsive air of something which was neither exactly horror, nor physical distress."

Kirilov is plain, round-shouldered, shabby.

"...He was not good-looking. His thick, almost negroid lips, aquiline nose, and languid, indifferent glance, held something which was unpleasantly harsh, cold and

severe. His unbrushed hair, sunken temples, the premature greyness of his long, narrow beard, with the chin gleaming through it here and there, the earthy pallor of his skin, his negligent awkward manners, all suggested habitual want, deprivation, weariness of life, lack of interest in people. To look at his inexpressive figure you would never have thought this man had a wife, that he could weep for a child."

Abogin is good-looking. He has the elegant bearing of a dilettante or a Bohemian.

"...There was something aristocratic and leonine in his bearing, his tightly buttoned frock-coat, his mane of hair, and his face.... Even his pallor, and the childish timidity with which he glanced up the stairs while taking off his overcoat, did not mar the general impression or affect the state of good nourishment, the health, and the self-confidence which emanated from his whole figure."

Strange to say, his imposing lion-like appearance only enhances the impression of Abogin's vulgarity; the likeness to the king of beasts is purely superficial and therefore pretentious.

Kirilov and his wife "said nothing," "did not weep" in their grief, whereas Abogin "went on wailing." This detail, too, emphasizes the fact that Chekhov, who was so reserved and undemonstrative himself, and hated any display of feeling, was on the side of Kirilov with all his heart.

When Abogin implored Kirilov to go with him, "... Abogin was sincere, but it was remarkable that all his phrases sounded stilted, callous, unnecessarily florid, and seemed an offence to the atmosphere of the doctor's flat...."

The very words which Abogin uses to describe his wife's treachery are hackneyed and unnecessarily florid. We cannot help feeling that Kirilov, from the point of

view of the author himself, was within his rights in describing those vulgar words as an insult to himself.

It is not so much a story of two civilized human beings unjustly inflicting insults upon one another, as a story of human grief insulted by vulgarity.

Thus we gradually get disillusioned about Abogin's elegance. It is skin-deep, as superficial as his love for music. His is not a musical soul, for him music is merely practising on all those "double-basses and trombones," as Kirilov bitingly remarks. And that is why Abogin never rises above the level of an amateur. He would never have become a professional, even if he had not sacrificed all to a trivial, flighty, idle society lady. The moment his own intimate interests are involved, Abogin's essentially unmusical, unpoetical nature, his emptiness, the utter insignificance of his entire life, the superficiality of his elegance, reveal themselves.

Only those whose life is bound up with work have a right to all human feelings. Kirilov speaks on behalf of "all workers"; the reader feels that he stands for the mass of Russian men and women who work, who have a profound sense of human dignity and a detestation of idleness and parasitism.

Only in those who work is there true poetry, beauty, the music of life. The artist instils disgust for superficial beauty, sham poetry in his readers, who are made to feel that these things are insults to all that is profoundly human, that they debase true beauty.

Chekhov displays great penetration in showing that the aridity and harshness of people like Kirilov, exhausted by overwork and deprivation, are merely superficial, concealing the real beauty of their natures, while the elegance and chivalry of the Abogins are mere glitter.

And so Kirilov's unfairness is only superficial. We begin to understand that though Abogin went for Kirilov

in good faith, believing he was asking a doctor to visit a patient, from the broader, human point of view he had *no right* to plunge the grief-stricken Kirilov into the ugly vulgar atmosphere of the trivial world in which he lived. He had no right to demand a heroic feat of Kirilov.

Moreover Kirilov only seems to be unfair when he accuses Abogin of insulting him by letting him into the "trivial secrets" of his love. Abogin, to be sure, has no idea he is offering an insult to Kirilov, when, in the simplicity of his heart, he confides his grief to him "as a friend." It is not his fault, after all, that every word he utters drips with vulgarity, for the very air he has breathed all his life is saturated with it. Certainly, Kirilov is "unjust." But how pitiful this blamelessness of Abogin for which the only thing to be said is that it is not his fault that he is essentially vulgar!

If we set aside for a moment the question of trivial fairness and turn to the larger human truth, we must admit that Kirilov has a right to feel that the impact of this parasitical life, all perfume and prostitution, on his simple, sacred parental grief, is an insult.

It is, of course, no mere chance that Abogin's misfortune turns out to be a farce, for nothing serious or truly dramatic can be expected from the insignificant, empty life led by the Abogins and their wives and their wives' lovers. To demand of Kirilov a heroic effort, only to open wide to him the doors of this pitiable existence, what is this but desecration of human feelings?

Every detail in the story enhances Kirilov's human dignity and the parasitism and vulgarity of Abogin. Take, for instance, the description of Kirilov waiting in Abogin's drawing-room: Kirilov sat in an arm-chair and "inspected his carbolic-stained fingers. He barely observed a crimson lamp-shade and a 'cello-case, but glancing towards the ticking clock he did notice a stuffed wolf, as massive and well-nourished as Abogin himself."

These apparently casual touches: the hands of the man who works, stained with carbolic acid, so alien to the elegant drawing-room, the apt comparison of Abogin with a well-nourished wolf—all these details reveal Chekhov's contempt for parasites and idlers, and his love for the "little man," the worker.

The love and hatred of the author, as we see, are not revealed directly in the narrative, they are inherent in it, forming its undercurrent.

Chekhov himself does not draw the uncompromising conclusions which the artistic truth of his story forces on the reader. To him the sentiments indulged in by Kirilov on his way home seemed "unjust and cruel. He condemned Abogin, Abogin's wife, Papchinsky, everyone living in a rosy perfumed dusk, and gave himself up to hatred and contempt for them all the way, till his very heart ached. And an attitude to these people which was quite unjust took firm root in his mind.

"Time will pass, and Kirilov's grief will pass, but the unjust attitude, unworthy of a human heart, will not pass, but will remain with the doctor till the day of his death."

This conciliatory note introduced by Chekhov into his story—a note which does not blend with the poetry of the composition—may be partly explained by the "appeasing" influences of the Tolstoi dogma which Chekhov was under at the time.

Thus, after giving a caustic portrait of a liberal-minded gentleman and venting all his contempt on him, Chekhov, in a way which was typical of the liberal-humane attitude of the time, attempts to tone down his own wrath and scorn. And yet we cannot avoid the conviction that Kirilov's unshakable opinion of people who live in a "perfumed dusk" is close to that cherished by Chekhov himself, that he sympathizes with it whole-heartedly, though it seems to him to be "unworthy of a human heart." The conviction of Dr. Kirilov remained the conviction of

Dr. Chekhov "till the day of his death," it grew on him, gaining in clarity and consciousness with time. *Time passed*, and Chekhov no longer considered it necessary to apologize to the reader for this conviction as he apologized for the "cruel" sentiments of the hero of *Antagonists* in the concluding paragraph of the story.

Antagonists is a story testifying to the completeness, the inexhaustible strength of that love for the ordinary man, the worker, and to the depths of democratic feeling, which made Chekhov as a writer so dear to the democratic, working part of humanity. It needed the genius of Chekhov to be able to do what he has done in this story: to place the character he obviously sympathizes with in the wrong, to show him as cherishing unjust sentiments; to give him a plain, unattractive and even revolting appearance; to contrast him, to his disadvantage, with his good-looking, elegant and "gentlemanly" antagonist; to apologize for his favourite character's unjust sentiments; and with it all to make the reader see clearly the true human value, the dignity, the stern charm of this very character, so unprepossessing in his outward aspect, so unjust in his inward thoughts, and with the same iron conviction to make the reader see the utter nothingness of his elegant antagonist. Chekhov's genius was fed by his veritably inexhaustible love for the common man.

In 1889, soon after *Antagonists*, Chekhov published a story called *Princess*, extremely close in content and characters to *Antagonists*. In *Princess* a doctor, obviously own brother to Kirilov, is contrasted with an attractive, elegant, "poetical" creature—the Princess—who could easily be Abogin's sister. The doctor, at one time employed on one of the Princess' estates and dismissed by her, though still dependent on this aristocrat and millionairess, tells her a few home truths, much like those which Kirilov told Abogin.

The doctor tells her that the "prevailing spirit" which reigns in all her estates and pervades her own life, is "lack of love, a hatred of men and women which made itself felt in everything. The entire system of your life is based on this hatred. A hatred of the human voice, of faces, heads, footsteps ... in a word, of everything that makes up a human being.... What I mean is that you regard human beings as Napoleon regarded them—as cannon-fodder. But Napoleon at least had some idea to go on, and you have nothing, nothing but hatred!... You would like some facts? With pleasure! In your village of Mikhaltsevo three of your former chefs, who went blind in the heat of your kitchen stoves, are living on charity. Every healthy, strong, good-looking creature on your thousands of acres has been taken by you and your hangers-on for footmen, flunkeys, coachmen. These two-legged beings have been brought up in flunkeyism, gorged themselves, coarsened, in a word, lost the stamp of humanity.... Young doctors, agronomists, teachers—intellectual workers of every sort—have been, God knows, torn from their work, from honest toil, and forced for the sake of a bare maintenance to take part in puppet-shows which are enough to make decent people feel ashamed. Sometimes a young man becomes a hypocrite, a toady, a sneak before he has served three years. And your bailiffs... the mean spies ... from morning till night they scour your thousands of acres, trying to get three skins from one ox to please you.... Nobody thinks of common people as human beings here."

Like Doctor Kirilov, this doctor also speaks up for all *common men and women*, whether manual workers or intellectuals. And what an exposure, not of the Princess alone, but of the whole parasitical world of property-owners, is contained in the doctor's wonderful speech!

In *Princess*, with still greater ruthlessness than in *Antagonists*, Chekhov strips his enemy of all external

beauty and poetry. He inspires the reader with such a loathing for the pretty parasite as to make her actually repulsive notwithstanding all her elegance and grace.

The Princess is positively incapable of understanding the doctor: he is casting his pearls before swine. She accepts his apologies the morning after their talk as her due.

" 'I was carried away by spiteful, revengeful feelings' says the doctor, 'and talked ... a lot of nonsense. In a word—I beg your pardon.'

"The Princess smiled sweetly and raised her hand to his lips. He kissed the hand and blushed."

She is sublimely sure of her own kind-heartedness and charm, convinced that to come into contact with her must make people happy; she is too feather-brained to remember what the doctor had said, and quite incapable of realizing that her very existence constitutes the ruin of numbers of men and women.

The doctor in *Antagonists* had no idea of apologizing to his opponent, it was the author who did it for him, but in *Princess* the position is reversed: it is the doctor who apologizes to his enemy, while the author withholds his approval. He no longer regards the doctor's sentiments as "unjust, unworthy of a human heart."

The salient feature of *Princess* is a clear, uncompromising, ruthless attitude towards the representative of the parasitical class. "I'm describing a most unpleasant female," said Chekhov of his work on *Princess* in a letter to a friend.

How laconically, literally in a single word, does the author give us to understand that the doctor's apology is not sincere, that it is his dependent position which forces him to make it. This one word is—"blushed." The doctor blushed as he kissed the hand graciously extended to him by the Princess; he blushed from the consciousness of the humiliating nature of the scene, from shame at having to call the thoughts he had been cherishing for

years—intelligent, rational thoughts, the only ones worthy of the human heart—"nonsense."

Doctor Kirilov is own brother to many of Chekhov's characters, he is one of the varieties of Chekhov's favourite type, that of the toiler, of the "little man." Another such character we find in the hero of *The School-teacher* (1886). One of the characteristic traits of Chekhov's artistic method is the way in which he treats salient points as if they were not really important. The consumptive factory school-teacher Fyodor Lukich Sisoyev has only a fortnight to live, but he does not know the end is so near and, as in former years, attends the traditional banquet given by the factory management annually after the school examinations. The banquet is graced by all the great ones, the inspector of public schools, teachers from the factory school and other schools in the neighbourhood. "These banquets, notwithstanding their official character, were always occasions of prolonged gaiety, embellished by good fare; the teachers, forgetting rank for once and thinking of nothing but their own righteous labours, and eating to their hearts' content, all got drunk together, talked themselves hoarse, and dispersed late in the evening, filling the factory settlement with their singing and the sound of smacking kisses. Sisoyev, in accordance with the number of years he had been teaching in the school, had enjoyed thirteen of these banquets."

But this, his fourteenth dinner-party, was ruined by Sisoyev, and turned out to be neither gay nor long. Sisoyev finds fault with his colleagues and destroys the festive mood. He is sure that Lyapunov, the teacher from another school, had treated his pupils unfairly during the examinations; as soon as he made his appearance at the dinner, which had begun without him, for knowing how ill he was, nobody had expected him, he went straight up to Lyapunov:

" 'It's disloyal! Yes, Sir! Decent gentlemen never give dictation the way you did!'

" 'For goodness' sake, can't you drop it?' said Lyapunov, frowning. 'Aren't you sick of it yourself?'

" 'By no means! Babkin never made spelling mistakes before! I know what made you dictate that way. You wished my pupils to fail so that your school should seem better than mine. I see it all!'

" 'Can't you leave me alone?' snapped Lyapunov. 'What the devil do you want with me?'

" 'Come, gentlemen,' intervened the inspector, with a tearful grimace. 'Really, the matter's too trifling to make a fuss about. Three mistakes, no mistakes—what does it matter?'

" 'It does matter. Babkin never made mistakes before!'

" 'Can't leave a fellow alone,' continued Lyapunov, snorting angrily. 'Takes advantage of his illness to pester other people. But I won't have it, Sir, whether you're ill or not!' "

Again we are confronted with Chekhov's wonderful gift for placing his favourite character at a disadvantage, showing him in a most unfavourable light, and yet gaining for him the reader's sympathy. The toast proposed by Sisoyev is obviously strained, the teacher harps on intrigues and conspiracies carried on against him during the fourteen years of his service, even hinting at false witness borne against himself, declaring that he knew who his foes and defamers were, but would not name them "for fear of spoiling some people's appetite...." When he stopped speaking, "everybody breathed more freely, as if the room had been sprinkled with cold water, driving away the stuffiness."

His illness makes Sisoyev impossible to deal with, his presence, a nuisance to all around him. And yet, beneath the outward aspect of the man we perceive another Sisoyev—the teacher in the highest sense of the word, the

gifted pedagogue, the Sisoyev he had been all his life. Conversation round the table turns upon the factory school, and all of a sudden everyone begins to talk freely and enthusiastically of the school and Sisoyev.

" 'I have to admit in all sincerity that your school really is a miracle,' said the inspector. 'Don't think I'm trying to flatter you. What I mean is, I have never come across a school like yours in my life. I sat through the examinations and was amazed.... Wonderful children! They know a great deal, and give their answers fluently, and they're quite unlike other school children, they're not intimidated, they're quite frank.... It is obvious, too, that they are fond of you, Fyodor Lukich. You are a pedagogue to the marrow, you're a born teacher. You have everything that is required: inborn vocation, years of experience, enthusiasm for your work.... Your energy and *savoir faire*, notwithstanding your poor health, are amazing.... Such self-control, you know, such confidence! Someone rightly said of you at the school council that you are a poet in your own sphere.... That's just what you are—a poet!'

"And everyone, all the diners, began unanimously to praise Sisoyev's extraordinary talents. It was as if a dam had burst, releasing sincere, enthusiastic words, such as men, held back by cautiousness and sobriety, never utter. Sisoyev's speech, his impossible temper, and the grim unpleasant expression of his face were all forgotten. Everyone spoke out, even the silent, timid new teachers, wretched, downtrodden youths who never addressed the inspector without calling him 'Your Honour.' It was clear that in his circle Sisoyev was a personality.

"Accustomed to success and praise throughout his fourteen years of working, he listened indifferently to the enthusiastic hum of his admirers."

The sentimental German manager of the factory, Bruni, drunk with the praises of his teacher, saw fit to join the

chorus and announced solemnly that the management "knows how to appreciate," and that "the family of Fyodor Lukich would be provided for, and that a month ago a certain sum had been deposited in the bank for this purpose.

"Sisoyev cast a bewildered look at the German, then at his colleagues, as if asking—why his family, and not himself?" He read the truth in their faces. And the teacher wept.

At home he decided that he need not have "howled." "It's just anaemia and catarrh of the stomach, and the cough comes from the stomach, too."

One cannot help thinking of Chekhov himself in this connection: at the time when he wrote *The School-teacher*, and a little later, he tried to drive away the thoughts of tubercular disease by exactly the same reasoning....

"Consoling himself thus, he slowly undressed, cleaned his black suit with a whisk-brush for a long time, folding it carefully and putting it away in a drawer, which he then locked.

"Then stepping towards the desk, on which a heap of children's notebooks was piled, he chose one belonging to Babkin, sat down and plunged into contemplation of the round childish hand....

"While he was looking through his pupils' dictation, the district doctor sat talking to his wife in a whisper in the next room, telling her that a person, who in all probability had not more than a week to live, should not have been allowed to attend a dinner."

The title of the story expresses its content exactly. We feel that the main character is a teacher to the marrow, we can picture him to ourselves as he is with his pupils, we see that teaching constitutes the highest and only pleasure in his existence, we believe that he is veritably a poet in the pedagogical field. And we know that he had not been indulging in mere phantasy when he spoke of

intrigues, conspiracies and false witness in his speech at the dinner-table (out of place though it may have seemed). How could there possibly not have been intrigues, conspiracies and false witness, when Sisoyev's pupils were unlike all others, frank and unafraid? In the person of Sisoyev we evidently have a pedagogue-innovator, whose methods and principles run counter to the accepted routine. How he must have worked before he won recognition and was allowed to work the only way he considered the right way! What must have been his want before he achieved a tolerable economic position! There is just a light touch which gives the reader an idea of how most of the teachers lived—the young teachers, timid, downtrodden youths, never addressing the inspector without prefixing the words "Your Honour."

Let us now compare with this story Chekhov's *In the Cart* (1897), the story of a village teacher, an intelligent woman with traces of former beauty and elegance, who during her years of teaching in a village school has aged, coarsened, lost her beauty, become angular and awkward, as if there were lead in her veins, who fears everything, springing to her feet at the appearance of a member of the village council or the school guardian, never venturing to sit down in their presence, never speaking of them otherwise than respectfully.

Sisoyev, too, had gone through a great deal as he journeyed through life, had worked himself into consumption before achieving a tolerable position so rare for schoolteachers in tsarist Russia, and the respect and recognition, all of which he only won after a lifetime of labour, almost on the brink of the grave. It is clear that while he has eyes to see he will look through his pupils' exercise-books with emotion, taking pride in their success and sorrowing over their shortcomings.

What made Chekhov use a code to conceal his love for his characters? Why does he place them in positions

which belittle rather than elevate them? Kirilov is unattractive and cross-grained, Sisoyev has an impossible temper, some are too yielding, others rude, yet others are eccentric, and so on. But Chekhov really loved his characters, these "little men"; he loved them with a passionate, tender, shy and, strange as the word may seem, an almost apologetic love. He never for a moment lost a sense of responsibility for their fate, and for being unable to find a way of bettering their life. "Do you know," he once said to Gorky, "when I see a teacher, I feel embarrassed for his timidity, for his shabby clothes; I can't help feeling that it is in a way my fault, too ... I mean it!" For their timidity, their inability to stand their ground, to act like men, their ignorance of the way to set about changing the world—for all these faults of his heroes, Chekhov held himself personally responsible, since to a certain extent their features were those of the author himself. Another great writer was soon to appear on the scene, promoted from the ranks of *little great men*, first and foremost those of the heroic army of the Russian working class—and these will be the people conscious that they are the *rulers of tomorrow*, people like Gorky's Nil or Pavel Vlassov. Chekhov's heroes were far from this consciousness. And yet they can be regarded as a kind of reserve of the same army, soldiers who had not as yet understood their aim, or found their "ruling principle."

Polinka, a story published in 1887, is filled with tender love for the "little" man. The chief characters are Nikolai Timofeich, a salesman in a draper's shop, and Polinka, a girl come to look for stuff for the dressmaker's establishment in which she works. They discuss the various kind of stuff, the salesman is professionally urbane, glib, animated, to all appearances gay and cheerful. Both he and Polinka conceal from the bystanders that, under cover of the talk about merchandise, they are really talk-

ing about their own fate, their future, their very life. It is evident that they have once been sweethearts, but now Polinka is violently in love with some student, is herself terrified of this new passion, and seeks advice and help from Nikolai Timofeich, fearing to lose him, but incapable of coping with the new and overwhelming passion. Their conversation, with its double meaning—the obvious one, "for everyone to hear," and the secret one, for themselves alone—is dramatic in its contrasting elements. The profusion of haberdashery terminology and appellations, the bead trimming and the buttons, conceal from those around the drama unfolding itself in the busy shop. Both would have liked to speak out loud, to weep perhaps, to expostulate eagerly—but dare not by so much as a melancholy glance betray to the customers that an intimate conversation is being carried on; this would be improper, such things are not done in haberdashery shops. Nikolai Timofeich might lose his reputation, and compromise Polinka. Their muffled voices, furtiveness and reserve make their conversation more tense than it would have been if they could have spoken naturally.

" 'Then I want some plumes,' says Polinka.

" 'Feathers are the fashion just now. The fashionable colour, if I may say so, is heliotrope, or maroon shot with yellow. We have an enormous choice. And what you think you're up to, I'm sure I don't know. You're in love, of course, but how can it all end?'

"Red patches appeared under the eyes of Nikolai Timofeich. Crumpling some delicate, fluffy braid in his hands, he continued in muffled tones:

" 'You think he'll marry you, do you? Well, you can think again. Students are not allowed to marry, and anyhow do you think he has honourable intentions? Not he! Why, those students, they don't regard the likes of us as human beings. . . .' "

The secret of this story's charm—the wistful, compassionate Chekhov smile—lies in the rapid transition from strictly professional remarks to those of a secret, profoundly intimate nature. " 'We have an enormous choice. And what you think you're up to, I'm sure I don't know.' " " 'Not just reeds, not bones, but genuine whalebone.... What is there for us to talk about? There is nothing to be said.... You mean to go out with him tonight, don't you?'

" 'Y-yes.' "

Polinka knows the student does not love her, that Nikolai Timofeich speaks the bitter truth in prophesying her fate.

" 'You're the only one who loves me, I have nobody else I can talk to.' "

Such is the drama of the salesman and the milliner's assistant, two "little," infinitesimally "little" human beings. We seem to see the relations between Polinka and the student, who had dazzled her by his unusualness, his inaccessible brilliance, so far out of her reach.

Chekhov's ability to enter whole-heartedly into all the circumstances, to grasp the very essence of the environment he is describing, to reproduce the very atmosphere, is quite remarkable, making us feel as if we were ourselves in the haberdasher's, breathing its air, our eyes resting on the counter with its pyramids of boxes, we see and hear all these people in the shop. His ability to discover and re-create the atmosphere of the background, his artistic affection for the objective reproduction of the unique features displayed in a given sphere, is extraordinary. And under it all is that same love for the "little" man. It was this love which made Chekhov write *Moscow Hypocrites* in 1888, a newspaper article in which he spoke out on behalf of the salesmen against the Municipal Duma, "two-thirds of whose members are merchants," which, under pressure of merchant proprietors,

had revoked the law it had itself recently passed, limiting business hours on Sundays and holidays. The shops were again kept open eleven or twelve hours on Sundays and holidays. "The proprietors of grocers', drapers' and fishmongers' shops attending the debates" (in the Duma —*Author*) "cheered so loudly that the police were twice forced to turn them out." Chekhov holds up to scorn the arguments produced by the shopkeepers in favour of abolishing Sunday rest for the salesmen. One of the arguments was that "if the salesmen are free they will haunt the taverns, thus desecrating the Sabbath. 'What saints they must be themselves!'" exclaims Chekhov, and concludes his article with a characteristic aphorism, at once sage and whimsically rueful: "a thousand depraved canaries and rabbits are infinitely preferable to one pious wolf." In this connection it is interesting to remember how the salesman employed by Laptev in the story *Three Years* (1895), driven to despair and madness by the ruthless exploitation and insults of his masters, by the hopeless misery of his life, "rushed barefoot into the street in his underclothes, shaking his fists at his master's windows, shouting that he was being tortured to death; for a long time afterwards, when the poor chap came to his senses, they laughed and teased him for calling his masters 'plantators' instead of 'exploiters'. . . ."

In connection with the question as to which of Chekhov's heroes was his favourite, a story published in 1892 will be found, together with *Antagonists*, to be particularly significant and may be regarded as representative of the ideology underlying the whole of Chekhov's work. This story is especially interesting in that it helps us to understand the nature of Chekhov's favourite character as well as Chekhov's entire system of aesthetics, the whole style of his work.

The story is *The Grasshopper*, a story of an "insignificant," ordinary man, Doctor Dimov. Dimov is a strong,

courageous man, whose gentleness and kindness, and timid, always slightly apologetic delicacy and simplicity merely emphasize his will-power, his ability to work indefatigably, his pertinacity in the pursuance of his aims, his devotion to science.

The misfortune that overtook Abogin (*Antagonists*) fell to the lot of Dimov: his wife betrayed him. Dimov loves his wife with all the force and integrity of a lofty and pure nature. Unlike Abogin, Dimov is profoundly human in his grief.

Dimov's wife, "the grasshopper," who devotes her entire life to the search for a great man, is an elegant amateur, with gifts in the various spheres of art. She is surrounded by celebrities, brilliant men with sounding names, artists, actors and writers. But she is always thirsting for new great men.

Among the celebrities surrounding his wife, Dr. Dimov appears to be an ordinary, insignificant person.

"All Olga Ivanovna's friends and acquaintances went to her wedding.

" 'Look at him—there *is* something about him, isn't there?' she said to her friends, nodding towards her husband—apparently anxious to explain how it was that she had agreed to marry a commonplace, in no way remarkable man."

Chekhov manages to convey the shade of eccentricity, unexpectedness, capriciousness in her decision to marry Dimov, the triviality and superficiality of her admiration for her husband. It is almost the same kind of admiration she expresses, later in the story, for the telegraph-operator in whose wedding celebrations she and other summer visitors take part from sheer boredom. "Good-looking boy," she said to her husband, "and no fool, there's something strong, bearish about his face, you know.... He could sit for the portrait of a youthful Varangian."

This is exactly the style in which she talks to the guests visiting her "drawing-room" about Dimov:

"Do look at his forehead, everyone! Dimov, turn your profile to us! Look, everyone—the face of a Bengal tiger, and an expression as sweet and kind as a doe's!"

The young telegraph-operator and Dimov are mere toys, with which she amuses herself, little thinking that toys break into smithereens when carelessly handled—just as Dimov's life was broken.

In the eyes of Olga Ivanovna and her friends Dimov is merely a good-natured fellow, not to be compared with all those brilliant people.

But when Dimov, in sucking the pus from the throat of a little boy, catches diphtheria and dies, one of his colleagues, Dr. Korostelev, says bitterly to Olga Ivanovna:

" ' Dying because he sacrificed himself! What a loss to science!... In comparison with all the rest of us he was a great man, a remarkable man. What a gift! What hopes he inspired in us all!' went on Korostelev, wringing his hands. 'My God, my God, he would have been such a scientist, such a rare scientist!...'

"In his despair Korostelev covered his face with both hands.

" 'And what moral force!' he continued, getting more and more angry with someone. 'Kind, pure, affectionate soul—crystal-clear! He served science and he died in the cause of science. Worked like a horse, day and night, nobody spared him, and he, young, learned, a future professor, had to look for private practice, sit up at night doing translations, to pay for those—miserable rags!'

"Korostelev looked at Olga Ivanovna with loathing...."

But diphtheria was not the chief reason why Dimov's young life was cut short, it was merely an ally of Olga Ivanovna herself. She had not noticed, had not understood that the *great man*, in search of whom she had spent her whole life, was living side by side with her.

She had missed, gadded away the most important thing of all; the strength and the beauty of Dimov's character had been lost on her, she had not been able to see the *extraordinary in the ordinary.*

Chekhov's readers discerned in Dimov the features of a great Russian scientist of the Sechenov type. Chekhov was fully alive to the national characteristics of people of this sort, to the everyday heroism of their Herculean labours, their boundless modesty, spiritual strength, steely pertinacity, noble love for their country and their countrymen, devotion to the cause of civilization. While creating the image of Dimov, Chekhov put into it all his admiration for the Russian scientist. It was precisely such people to whom he referred in his remarkable article on the death of N. M. Przhevalsky:

"Their high principles, lofty ambition, which has for its source the honour of their country and science, their resoluteness, their clearness of purpose which neither danger nor allurements of personal happiness can shake, the wealth of their knowledge, their diligence ... make them heroes in the eyes of the people, the embodiment of superior moral power.... Such personalities are living documents proving to society that as well as men and women who spend their lives discussing optimism and pessimism, writing mediocre stories to kill time, drawing up unnecessary schemes and cheap dissertations, going in for dissipation for the mere sake of proving their contempt for life, and lying for a pittance; as well as sceptics, mystics, neurotics, jesuits, philosophers, liberals and conservatives, there are people of another sort, capable of heroic feats, possessing faith, and thoroughly conscious of their aim. If the good characters created by writers have any educational value, those created by life itself must be doubly valuable. In this sense people like Przhevalsky are especially precious, since their lives, deeds, aims and moral aspect can be understood by a

child. It has ever been a rule that the nearer a man approaches truth, the simpler, the easier to understand he is."

In Ossip Dimov, Chekhov emphasizes his high moral strength, his tenacity, the wealth of his knowledge, his diligence, generosity, and the simplicity and frankness of his nature. Anton Pavlovich himself, by nature and by his artistic method, by his scientific attitude towards life and letters, approached the type of the Russian scientist more than anyone else. Scientists felt this affinity, and he was the favourite author of many of them. The famous Russian scientist K. E. Tsiolkovsky, who saw in Chekhov a fellow-fighter against routine, stagnation, stupidity and ignorance in all the spheres of life, wrote more than once: "I wish to be a Chekhov in science."

"There are so many sciences," wrote Tsiolkovsky, "they have been expounded in such detail, such loads of books have been written on them, that it is impossible for the human mind to study them all. Those who attempt this have to give it up in despair. And yet it is impossible to form one's outlook and ruling principle lacking some acquaintance with all the sciences, i.e., a general knowledge of the universe.

"And so I want to be a Chekhov in science: in short essays, accessible to the untrained or very little trained reader, to give a serious logical knowledge of the most reliable teaching as to the cosmos."

Like Chekhov and his heroes Tsiolkovsky searched for a "ruling principle," a general idea. A humble teacher in Borovsk, a tiny, remote town in the tsarist empire, Tsiolkovsky, who became an outstanding Russian scientist, innovator and inventor, "a small great man," was a veritable Chekhov hero, who acquired both a "general idea" and national recognition, and lived to enjoy the happiness of working in the land of socialism. Dimov and other Chekhov heroes like him lived and worked unrecognized,

ignored by indifferent fate, their gifts, in many cases, lost to humanity....

Dimov is a profoundly democratic type, combining, like Chekhov himself, the traits of a man of the people with lofty intellectual gifts. Dimov's democratic simplicity is felt in every detail of the narrative. During the bitter days which overtook him, Dimov began bringing home to dinner Korostelev, a friend of his, "a crop-headed little man with puckered features, who started buttoning and unbuttoning his coat from sheer embarrassment whenever Olga Ivanovna addressed him, and then fell to tweaking the left side of his moustache with his right hand.... They seemed to carry on a medical conversation just to give Olga Ivanovna an excuse not to talk, that is, not to lie. After dinner Korostelev would sit down at the piano, and Dimov would sigh and call out:

" 'Come on, old boy! What are you waiting for? Give us something nice and sad!'

"His shoulders raised and his fingers outspread, Korostelev would strike a few chords and begin singing in a tenor voice: 'Show me, show me the place in our country, where the Russian muzhik does not groan!' and Dimov would give another sigh, prop his head on his fist and plunge into thought."

Olga Ivanovna is a female variety of the species so abhorred by Chekhov—*the hangers-on in art.* He introduced a specimen of this type in *Dull Story* (1888), in the person of Alexander Adolfovich Gnekker who, in his capacity of admirer and suitor of Liza, a student at the conservatoire, makes his way into the home of an old professor.

"Though he neither sings nor plays himself, he has something to do with music and singing, sells mysterious grand-pianos to mysterious customers, is continually at the conservatoire, knows all the celebrities, and acts the host at concerts. He utters oracular musical criticisms

and I have observed that everyone hastens to agree with him.

"Rich people always have hangers-on, and it is the same with science and the arts. I don't suppose there is a single art or science free from the presence of 'foreign bodies' such as Mr. Gnekker. I am not a musician and may be mistaken about Gnekker, whom, moreover, I know very little. But his authoritative air and the complacency with which he stands near the piano and listens when anyone plays or sings, strike me as suspicious."

There are many subtle touches here. No artist ever looks at another artist's canvas, no musician listens to another musician with this conceited "dignity," as if to say: "I understand all this perfectly, it is just as it should be." They do not talk glibly about art, for they know what a hard thing art is. But the Gnekker tribe know everything for the simple reason that they really know nothing. Shallow individuals, caring for nothing but themselves and their own "dignity," they take advantage of the emotional nature of artists, clinging to them and gaining for themselves a position in society thanks to the works of others. And what first-rate officials in the service of art these Gnekkers make! How complacently they analyze real or imaginary defects in a work of art, what mountains they make of molehills! They are always on the look-out for themselves, even when they imagine they are helping artists.

Olga Ivanovna is quite another sort, though she belongs to the same species. Olga is first and foremost a woman. There is a certain disinterestedness in her quest for celebrities, but she can by no means be called a disinterested person. She loves to shine, to be the head of her own salon, to "rally her forces," to rule tastes, and is quite sure that her influence on artists is wholesome and elevating. She may be an even more dangerous parasite on art than Gnekker, for she really has gifts, however

infinitesimal, in various branches of art, she even possesses a certain infinitesimal amount of personal taste, has a superficial knowledge of painting, singing, music, the theatre and literature, and her shallow mind is quite lively. She is a sweet little thing. But she can be a tyrant, too. She would like to rule with a rod of iron all those artists, especially Ryabovsky, the budding celebrity who was ungrateful enough to forget how much he owed to her ennobling influence. She would have liked them all to dedicate their works to her, to consider her their Muse, their instructress, their benefactress. Like Gnekker she degrades art whenever she comes near it. She cannot bring out of the artists what they have of value, she is only capable of bringing out their most trivial qualities, and the hidden irony of the story lies precisely in the fact that, while she ponders over her good influence on the talented Ryabovsky, the reader realizes that it was his vulgar qualities which she brought out in him.

What a cruel joke fate played on the poor "grasshopper"!

" 'Yes, he was a remarkable man,' came in deep tones from the drawing-room.

"Olga Ivanovna went back in memory over her whole life with him, from beginning to end, in the utmost detail, and suddenly realized that he really had been a remarkable man, an unusual man, a great man, in comparison with all the others she had known. And remembering the attitude to him of her late father and of all his colleagues, she realized that they had all seen in him a future celebrity. The walls, the ceilings, the lamp and the carpet on the floor winked mockingly at her, as if trying to say: 'You've missed your chance!...' "

To have been looking for a celebrity all her life and to have missed a future celebrity at her side—what mockery! How Olga Ivanovna had been fooled! How everything seemed to beck mockingly at her, taunting her with

the triviality and emptiness of her "talented" life! It is in handling a subject like this, in the melancholy smile at the tragicomedy of life, in the scorn with which he treats the triviality of his principal character, in what can be read between the lines, that Chekhov shows himself to be still a satirist; this makes itself felt also in the blend of melancholy and derision, of drama and comedy characteristic of all his work.

One of the strongest scenes in the story—indeed, its culminating point—is that in which Dimov comes home after having delivered his scientific dissertation.

"One evening when she was taking a last look at herself in the glass before going to the theatre, Dimov came into the bedroom in a frock-coat and a white tie. He smiled meekly and looked straight into her eyes, as he used to formerly. His face was radiant.

" 'I've just presented my thesis,' he said, sitting down and smoothing the knees of his trousers.

" 'Was it a success?' asked Olga Ivanovna.

" 'Wasn't it just?' he laughed, craning his neck to catch sight of his wife's face in the mirror, for she still stood with her back towards him, putting the finishing touches to her hair. 'Wasn't it just?' he repeated. 'And it's highly probable, you know, that they'll make me docent in general pathology. It looks very like it.'

"It was obvious from his blissful, radiant expression that if Olga Ivanovna had shared his joy and triumph he would have forgiven her all, both present and future, and would have forgotten all, but she understood neither what a docent was nor what general pathology meant, besides she was afraid of being late for the theatre, and so she said nothing.

"He sat on for a few minutes, and then, smiling apologetically, went away."

Dimov, the "little" man, is so utterly non-existent for Olga Ivanovna, surrounded as she is by the "élite," that

she does not know how to take this great event in his life. How like Chekhov to show the spiritual vacuity and poverty, the callousness and crudity of Olga Ivanovna, not so much in her unfaithfulness, as in her indifference to the triumph of Dimov's work, so obviously brilliant, in her mute reception of the news, in the way she remains standing with her back to him as she puts the finishing touches to her finery before the mirror. This scene may be regarded as the culminating point of the story, since in it Olga Ivanovna deals a final blow at Dimov, after which came his illness and death.

Both *The Grasshopper* and *Antagonists* deal with one of Chekhov's favourite themes: the contrast between false and true beauty. Olga Ivanovna's "artistic" nature, her dabbling in art, her entire outlook are inspired not by beauty, but by the straining after prettiness. Hear her confide in Dimov the plans she and her friends have made for the wedding-feast of the telegraph-operator:

"...Fancy, the wedding will be just after the service, and everyone is going straight from the church to the home of the bride.... The grove, the singing of birds, spots of sun on the grass, you know, and all of us coloured spots against a bright green background—ever so original, just like the French expressionists."

Olga Ivanovna's attitude both to life and to art may be described as pseudo-aesthetic. But how sinister all this cult of prettiness, this "taste," this elegant dilettantism, this passion for the arts—sinister in its heartlessness, shallowness, inspired by no human feelings, by no inner significance, not even by the simplest, most ordinary kindness. How lifeless and vapid it all was! The horror of it all is vividly felt in the deeply moving scene in which Olga Ivanovna realizes for one brief moment the hideousness of the whole "artistic" style of her life. Just when her emotions over the break with Ryabovsky

have reached their crisis, Olga Ivanovna suddenly discovers that her husband is seriously ill.

" 'Can it really be?' thought Olga Ivanovna, cold with horror. 'Why, it's dangerous!'

"Without knowing why, she lit a candle and took it to her bedroom, and while trying to decide what she ought to do, she caught sight of herself in the looking-glass. With her pale, frightened face, in her jacket with the high, puffy sleeves, and yellow flounces on the front, and the eccentric diagonal stripes on her skirt, she saw herself as an awful fright, a revolting creature. An infinite pity for Dimov surged up within her, for his boundless love for her, his young life and even his lonely bed, in which he had not slept for so long, and she remembered his invariable meek, submissive smile. She wept bitterly and wrote an imploring note to Korostelev. It was two o'clock in the morning."

That jacket of hers with the yellow flounces on the front, the eccentric diagonal stripes on her skirt, all become symbolic of her whole life, essentially so shoddy, and so sinister in its pettiness, its egoism, its vapid prettiness. For the first time in her life Olga Ivanovna saw herself as others saw her, and realized the monstrosity and loathsomeness of her whole being. For a fleeting moment she saw herself as a murderess. Yes, she had cut short a young and infinitely precious life. With her cult of "beauty" she had deprived society of something that was great and luminous, had depreciated, darkened, devastated life, had all unconsciously killed something which really was beautiful. The words of the artist Repin would apply equally to *The Grasshopper* and to other stories by Chekhov: "It is almost inconceivable the way that a simple, unpretentious little tale, which may almost be called poor in content, ends by presenting an idea so great, so irrefutable, so profound...." Olga Ivanovna, introduced as a mere feather-brained society lady, develops into a

character of universal significance. That beauty of hers, for all its prettiness, capable of destroying that which is great and which contains true human values, is another image of Life the stepmother. Evil may sometimes be great, as in Lady Macbeth, and sometimes small; it may realize its nature, and it may not. In either case it may play the part of a murderer. Chekhov exposes the terrible evil of triviality in its power to work evil, and in the artistic force with which it is portrayed this triviality can vie with great evil. Natasha in *The Three Sisters*, herself the very embodiment of the terrible power of vulgarity and philistinism, is perhaps no less evil, and is portrayed with no less artistic force than is Lady Macbeth.

Olga Ivanovna's remorse is, like the rest of her emotions, exceedingly superficial. Lev Tolstoi, who rated the story very high, especially admired the way in which Chekhov made it perfectly clear to the reader that even after Dimov's death Olga Ivanovna would be the same as ever.

It is characteristic of Chekhov's works, and throws light on his entire outlook and his attitude to life and to human beings, that the idea of "ordinary" and "exceptional" personalities is developed on the basis of the love affair between Olga Ivanovna and Ryabovsky. Olga Ivanovna seeks greatness in the extraordinary, the exceptional, to her mind a great man belongs to the select few towering over the crowd of "ordinary," "little" men and women. It is noteworthy and highly characteristic of Chekhov that by her very unfaithfulness to her husband Olga Ivanovna expresses her contempt for the "ordinary," the "little" men, and her idea of the great man as one of the élite, head and shoulders above the crowd.

From the very start her affair with Ryabovsky is tinged with vulgarity. But this is not crude vulgarity, oh, no! It is skilfully concealed beneath the appearance of beauty and poetry. The important and varied role played

by landscape in Chekhov's works is evident in this story, in which landscape is used to expose the triviality of the relations developing between the painter and the admirer of his talent, who aspires herself to become a famous artist. It has already been noted here, in connection with *The Fit*, that the way in which Chekhov contrasts the beauty of nature with the ugliness of human life has nothing in common with the so-called "cosmic" idea, the abstract contrasting of nature with man, the tendency to crush "insignificant mortals" with the powerful and boundless majesty of nature. The beauty of nature in Chekhov's landscapes is not used to belittle man, never suggests that human life is nothing but vanity of vanities in the face of nature, that when you consider the cosmos it seems not to matter how you behave. The idea of the contrast between the eternal beauty of nature, her majesty, mystery and unfathomable wisdom, and the vanity, evanescence and insignificance of human life—an idea so often met with in the works of other authors—is completely alien to Chekhov. For him, the beauty of nature does not belittle man, but raises him to the level of beauty which one day is bound to be established here, in our beautiful world, throughout human life and all human relations. The beauty of nature as an eternal reproach to the imperfection, ugliness, injustice and triviality of human relations, as an eternal reminder of the necessity for building a new, beautiful life—herein lies the originality, the source of poetry, the profound significance of landscape in Chekhov's works. Chekhov regarded as unworthy a contrasting of nature with man which tends to belittle and humiliate man, and which is in reality tantamount to the justification of all the squalor and vulgarity of life on the grounds that insignificant mortal can never rise to the greatness of nature. It is characteristic of Chekhov that he links up this idea, hallowed by literary tradition, with vulgarians, well satisfied with

themselves and their surroundings. A long story, *My Life*, may be remembered in this connection:

"I stood at the gate and watched the passers-by.... Dusk was falling and the stars were beginning to twinkle. And now my father, in his old top hat with the curly brim, walked slowly by arm in arm with my sister, acknowledging the bows of acquaintances.

" 'Look!' he was saying to my sister, pointing at the sky with that very umbrella he had once used for beating me. 'Look at the sky! Those stars, the smallest of them even, are each a world in itself! How insignificant is man compared to the universe!'

"He said this as if the fact of his own insignificance was extremely gratifying and flattering. Oh, what a mediocrity!"

How invaluable all Chekhov's details are. This umbrella, which figures as an instrument of chastisement against a grown-up son who dared to rebel against the foundations of petty-bourgeois existence, is now employed as a means for pointing out "profound" philosophical ideas! This umbrella is like the ironical smile of Chekhov, haunting all his works....

Those who were content with the reality around them, who wallowed in its filth, were naturally flattered and gratified with the contrast between the "inaccessible" majesty of nature and the weakness and insignificance of man, for this comparison could be used as a justification of the monstrosity and filth of reality, the insignificant life of insignificant people....

"On a still moonlit night in July, Olga Ivanovna stood on the deck of a Volga steamer looking in turns at the water and the exquisite river bank. Beside her stood Ryabovsky, telling her that the black shadows on the surface of the water were not shadows but a dream, that it would be good to forget everything, to die, to become a memory, surrounded by this magical, gleaming water,

this infinite sky, these mournful, pensive banks, all speaking to us of the vanity of our lives, and of the existence of something higher, something eternal, blissful. The past was trivial and devoid of interest, the future was blank, and even this divine, never-to-be-repeated night would soon end, would become part of eternity—why, then, live?

"And Olga Ivanovna listened in turn to Ryabovsky's voice and to the silence of the night, and told herself that she was immortal, that she would never die. The opalescent water, which was like nothing she had ever before seen, the sky, the banks, the black shadows, and the unaccountable joy filling her soul, all told her that she would one day be a great artist, and that somewhere, beyond the distance, beyond the moonlit night, in infinite space, there awaited her success, glory, the love of the people.... When she gazed long and unblinkingly into the distance she seemed to hear the sounds of solemn music, cries of enthusiasm, to see crowds, lights, herself in a white dress, and flowers raining upon her from all sides. She told herself, too, that beside her, leaning on the rail, stood a truly great man, a genius, one of God's elect...."

God's elect declares his passion.

" 'Don't talk like that,' said Olga Ivanovna, closing her eyes. 'It's awful. And what about Dimov?'

" 'What does Dimov matter? Why Dimov? What have I to do with Dimov? The Volga, the moon, beauty, my love, my ecstasy, but no Dimov.... Oh, I know nothing.... I don't need the past, give me only one moment ... one little moment!'

"Olga Ivanovna's heart beat violently. She tried to think of her husband, but the entire past, her wedding, Dimov, her Wednesday evenings, now seemed to her small, insignificant, dull, useless, and far, far away.... And after all—what did Dimov matter? Why Dimov?

What had she to do with Dimov? Was there really such a person, wasn't he just a dream?

" 'The happiness he has had is quite enough for an ordinary man like him,' she told herself, covering her face with her hands...."

Of course Ryabovsky expresses himself in a manner which is infinitely more refined and subtle than that of the mediocre provincial architect in *My Life*. But the essence of his artistic and poetical discourse is the same. Nature is boundless and mysterious, man insignificant and small, all is vanity—and since man is so small, how unimportant all his sins and virtues, his whole life! Why worry about life, why try to live more purely and righteously, why cramp oneself with boring responsibilities, duties, faithfulness? This facile philosophy serves as a justification of all sorts of bestialities for the architect in *My Life*; Ryabovsky exploits it for the seduction of a married woman. He behaves like the most commonplace seducer and fop, and all his grandiloquence is only needed to snatch a moment of bliss with Olga Ivanovna. The beauty of the landscape is used to seduce a married woman whose betrayal will lead to the destruction of her husband—what could be more vulgar? And how it all vulgarizes beauty itself! Chekhov's good, pure characters never jar with the beauty of landscapes; they endeavour to merge their life in it. But the vulgar characters, or those who perpetrate vulgarities, are in glaring contrast with the beauty of life and nature. What is taking place in the stillness of a beautiful July night is not beautiful. It is interesting to compare the love affair of Ryabovsky and Olga Ivanovna with that of Dmitri Dmitrich Gurov and Anna Sergeyevna in *The Lady with the Dog*. In *The Grasshopper*, the affair which begins so "poetically" ends in squalor. How disgusting the relations between Ryabovsky and Olga Ivanovna become in the winter, how ugly they themselves are, now hating each other and not

even troubling to conceal this hatred from those around them. The "love affair" of Gurov and Anna Sergeyevna in *The Lady with the Dog*, on the other hand, beginning in commonplace adultery, a vulgar health-resort romance, turns out to be the real and only love in their lives, influencing them both for the better, making them purer, more human, opening their eyes to real life. Here, love purges life of vulgarity; in the other, it thickens the vulgarity of the atmosphere, till both parties are nearly suffocated by its fumes, and poison the air around them with their breath.

Olga Ivanovna's classification of human beings into the "great" and the "small" is pure vulgarity; her idea that there are extraordinary, "elect" beings, to whom all is permitted, is vulgarity; her attitude to "great" men, superior beings called upon to trample on "ordinary" mortals, who should admire and thank them for it, is vulgarity; her scorn for the ordinary, "little" man, which she expresses so vividly when she bethinks herself that: "The happiness he (Dimov) has had is quite enough for an ordinary man like him" is vulgarity. This supercilious, selfish thought is vulgar. It was precisely the "grasshopper's" classification of humanity into great men and ordinary men which became for her a kind of moral sanction for the betrayal of Dimov. For Chekhov such an attitude was detestable. "You and I," he wrote in a letter to a friend, "are fond of ordinary people." Dimov's greatness lies in his simplicity and ordinariness. And Chekhov's own greatness lies in the fact that he was the poet of simple, unassuming Russian people.

The image of the grasshopper, hopping through life for some reason unknown, in the search for a remarkable, a great man, is, on the whole, a satire.

The heroine of another Chekhov story, *The Darling*, provided Lenin with material for a political-satirical summary of the qualities of a certain section of the intel-

lectuals—their lack of political principle and of stamina, their inconstancy, their inability to form independent views, to maintain an independent position. And are we not entitled to regard the heroine of *The Grasshopper* as a type of a large section of the intellectuals, "hopping" from the idolization of one "great man" to the idolization of another of the "elect," creating gods for themselves one moment, which they will debunk the next?

At first Chekhov intended to call the story of Doctor Dimov and his wife "The Great Man," and he sent it with this title to a periodical called *Sever* (*The North*). But he was not satisfied with the title himself. He wrote to V. Tikhonov, the editor of *Sever*: "I really don't know what to do about the title for my story. I do not like 'The Great Man,' at all. It must be called something else, it simply must. Call it—'The Grasshopper.' Mind you don't forget to change the title."

"The Great Man" does not sound like Chekhov. No doubt he considered it pretentious and grandiloquent. But it conveys the essence of the story very faithfully.

Chekhov's favourite characters are ordinary Russian men and women. In every one of them we clearly see not just the individual, but his entire background, slices from life.

Contemporary critics were alive to the novelty of his artistic method, but were unable either to define it or to realize its significance and fertility. Thus one critic stated that "Chekhov was the first and last Russian author to have no heroes." This critic insisted that "it would be hard to find a writer so bound up with the epoch and environment to which he belonged as Chekhov."

Blending erroneous formulas with happy guesses, the critic groped his way to an appreciation of the specific traits of Chekhov's style, but was unable to put his finger on its most important ingredient.

It is not true, of course, that Chekhov has "no heroes." But it is true that Chekhov has no hero who can be isolated from his environment. Chekhov's main hero was reality itself, the life of his country, of which his characters were particles.

The heroes of pre-Chekhov literature towered over their environment, and could not be regarded as typical of the masses. Such were Chatsky, Onegin, Pechorin, Beltov, Rudin, Levin, Nekhlyudov.

The hero of Russian literature had always formerly been portrayed as battling with his immediate environment, the narrow, petty social life of the privileged upper classes, from which he struggled to free himself in order to get closer to the people.

It was this struggle to free themselves from their immediate environment which made it possible to regard these characters as a summary of the best qualities of the progressive Russian of the epoch, of the salient features of the Russian national character. From the point of view of the class to which the heroes of traditional Russian literature belonged by birth they were all exceptional, extraordinary individuals, all, to put it mildly, "eccentric." At the same time the Pechorins, Chatskys and Rudins had, of course, no direct contact with the masses. They were all doomed, more or less, to that isolation from the people which Lenin remarked in the Decembrists. The *national* character of Russian literature showed itself in the fact that the Russian authors severely criticized those very shortcomings and defects of their heroes which were due to their isolation from the life of the people.

Chekhov's heroes come from a much wider and more democratic social environment.

Chekhov was to a great extent aware of this himself, and he worked resolutely at the improvement of his methods

of portraying real life. In a letter to Gorky he insists that the characters in a story "should not be conspicuous, detached from the masses," and praises Gorky's Crimean stories precisely because in them "one feels, as well as the characters themselves, the human mass they come from, air, perspective, in a word, everything."

Even in the briefest of Chekhov's stories one always feels the human mass from which his characters come, the stream of life is always visible, its movement expressed through the individual. This means that life itself, living reality, was the first and most important hero of Chekhov's stories.

If certain of Chekhov's contemporaries accused Chekhov of being too detached, this only showed that they were unable to understand the essence of Chekhov's method. Exponents of subjectivism like Mikhailovsky tried to confine the great artist within their own old-fashioned views, which real life was already exploding.

In an article on Chekhov's *In the Gully*, Gorky put his finger on the essence of Chekhov's detachment, pointing out that the deeds, thoughts, emotions and dispositions of Chekhov's heroes spring from reality, from life itself, from the "environment" influencing and educating them. And that is why, insisted Gorky, Chekhov's works lead the reader to the conclusion that it is reality itself which must be changed, for all that is bad and prevents the development of the best qualities of the people is due to this reality.

"Thus to elucidate life's manifestations," wrote Gorky, "is to apply to them the measures of sublime justice. Chekhov could do this, and because of his profoundly human objectivism he has been called callous and cold-hearted."

Behind Chekhov's Kirilovs and Dimovs we are vividly aware of innumerable ordinary working men.

One of the most significant and original features of Chekhov's aesthetic system is his ability to discover the beauty of the ordinary, that inconspicuous, everyday beauty of life which the "grasshopper" passed over without noticing.

This aesthetic principle—the secret beauty of the ordinary, the inconspicuous, the everyday—was linked up with Chekhov's belief in the richness, diversity and genius of the mass of ordinary Russian men and women, of the true Russia, in fact. This principle is a proof of the profoundly democratic spirit of Chekhov's work, in which the "little" men are raised to a lofty plane. In the gallery of Chekhov's portraits are revealed the profound qualities of the Russian character, with its reticent, hidden power and beauty.

THE GREAT WORKER. WHAT IS TALENT?

Chekhov was far from drawing revolutionary conclusions from the truths of life reflected in his works. At the same time he could not but realize that he was introducing a fresh element into the art of his epoch, representing as he did a democratic, middle-class literature, which had sprung up in opposition to that of the privileged classes—aristocratic and bourgeois-liberal literature, calling upon its readers to reconcile themselves to the foul reality of the times. Chekhov felt the necessity of allies. He strove to raise all the gifted writers, with whom he had worked on the magazines and with whom he felt an affinity, to the level of serious literature. He regarded literature as a collective affair. Replying to the statement of a writer-friend that Chekhov was "an elephant" amongst the herd of smaller beasts, Anton Pavlovich wrote:

"It is my conviction . . . that not a single one of us will be 'an elephant in our midst' or any other animal, and that we shall only succeed by the endeavours of a whole generation. We shall not be called Chekhov, or. . ." (here he names several contemporary writers—*Author*) "but 'the eighties,' or the 'end of the XIXth century.' "

This idea is extremely characteristic of Chekhov. There are no "elephants" among Chekhov's characters—according to Chekhov, the stronger, more vivid and more significant the individuality, the more deeply it expresses the feelings of the rank and file.

The democratic writers of the eighties had a hard time of it. Many petered out, deteriorated, grew weary, broke down, perished.

Chekhov was alive to the difficulties of those who reached to the heights of artistic creation from a lower social stratum. When he was awarded the Pushkin Prize, he wrote to Lazarev-Gruzinsky:

"...I am 'the spoiled child of fortune, though of humble birth,' a kind of Potyomkin in literature, emerging from the depths of *Razvlecheniye* and *Volna*, (*The Wave*), I am a *bourgeois-gentilhomme*, and such people cannot endure for long, any more than a fiddle-string which is keyed up too tight."

Alexei Laptev, one of the characters in *Three Years*, expresses Chekhov's constant awareness of the difficulties encountered by a man of the people in finding his path in life. "I simply cannot adapt myself to life, become its master.... All this ... I explain by the fact that I was born a slave, the grandson of a serf. Many obscure folk like us fall by the wayside in the struggle to get into the right path."

It is of little consequence that these words are put into the mouth of Alexei Laptev, the heir to millions left him by a father who rose from the peasantry and made his fortune. As the author sees him, Alexei Laptev is a typical middle-class intellectual and has practically nothing in common with Ostrovsky's arbitrary merchants.

Anton Pavlovich fully understood that these men are surrounded by implacable foes ready to gloat over any slip made by the "sons of cook-maids." In his story *On the Estate* he drew a portrait of a reactionary landed proprietor whom his own daughters call "the toad." In conversation with a young magistrate whom the host takes for a "gentleman," the landowner expounds his serf-holder's theory of "blue blood and the lower breeds," and invites his guest to take part in a "crusade" against the

"plebeians." All the great Russian writers, he argues—Pushkin, Gogol, Lermontov, Turgenev and Tolstoi—came from the aristocracy. The middle-class intellectuals have contributed nothing of value. He gloats over precisely the things which worry Chekhov.

"What can you say, my good sir, to this eloquent fact: the moment a plebeian makes his way into regions hitherto forbidden to him—into society, science, literature, the Zemstvo, the law—nature itself, mark you, comes to the defence of the superior rights of humanity and is the first to declare war on the hordes. For no sooner does the plebeian get out of his depths, when he begins to sicken, falls into a decline, goes mad, deteriorates; nowhere else will you meet so many neurotics, spiritual cripples, consumptives and weaklings as among this sweet lot. They perish like flies in autumn.... Let us then come to an agreement—as soon as a plebeian approaches us, let us throw the words of scorn right in his face: 'Hands off! Cobbler, stick to your last!' "

The guest replies that "he could not do that," for he comes from the lower classes himself. "My father was a common worker," he adds in gruff, staccato tones, "but I see no harm in that.... Yes, I come from the lower classes, and I'm proud of it."

From his early youth Chekhov could not help pondering over the difficulties hampering man's struggle to attain culture and take part in artistic creation. He was well aware that the change from one social environment to another, the transition from almost savage ignorance to the circle of highly-educated intellectuals centring around an aristocratic and bourgeois nucleus, was more often than not accompanied by profound nervous shock and serious nervous strain. Those who emerged from the lower classes were burdened with a sense of great responsibility, they had to be ever on their guard, waging a constant struggle for their right to do creative work;

they had to be continually working at self-improvement. Chekhov realized all this very early in life. And he wanted others to realize it, too.

In January 1889, Anton Pavlovich wrote the words to Suvorin which have become famous:

"The plebeian intellectuals have to purchase with their youth what the aristocratic writers receive gratis from mother nature. Why don't you write a story about a young man whose father was a serf, a young man who was in turn salesman, choir-boy, schoolboy and student, brought up to treat rank with respect, to kiss the hands of priests, to worship other men's ideas, to express gratitude for every bit of bread he eats, constantly flogged, going about giving lessons in worn boots, fighting with other boys, torturing animals, fond of dining with rich relatives, acting the hypocrite before God and man for no other reason than consciousness of his own insignificance—describe how this young man squeezed the slave in him out of his system drop by drop, till one fine morning he wakes up and discovers there is no more slavish blood coursing through his veins; it is all real human blood...."

These words sum up Chekhov's own experience of the strenuous process of re-education he had to undergo before he attained the level of a real human being.

He invited all who were dear to him to take part in his campaign against all that was slavish in themselves.

His struggle for his elder brothers was not merely the outcome of fraternal love. It was also the pride of the plebeian, who wishes there to be "more of us" on the advance posts of Russian culture.

But Alexander and Nikolai sank lower and lower.

In his struggle for their talent, Chekhov desired first and foremost that they should become real human beings.

He was aware of their inner protest against middle-class vulgarity, which the word "Taganrog" stood for in their minds. They considered themselves rebels protest-

ing against the suppression of their liberty. But Chekhov, with his ruthless criticism, revealed to them the weaknesses in themselves which showed that they were quite the opposite—that his brothers were far from having overcome those very principles of slavery which they imagined they had thrown off in their chaotic violence. The shortcomings of his brothers were manifest in everything, including their private domestic life.

Chekhov's struggle on behalf of his brothers, Alexander and Nikolai, is of so great general interest and gives such a vivid picture of certain features of the character of Anton Pavlovich himself that it is worth while to dwell on certain phases of it.

Alexander contracted a "civil marriage," without benefit of clergy, thus evoking his father's disapproval. Alexander was deeply hurt and wrote his father, protesting against such an attitude to his marriage and at the same time trying to reason with him. He wrote to his brothers, too, complaining of his father. In April 1883, Anton Pavlovich wrote to his brother:

"I cannot understand what you expect of Father.... He is as hard as a flint, like Sectarians, you will never get him to budge. And that is probably the secret of his strength.... As if you did not know this yourself. You are funny, really! Excuse me, Brother, but I think there is something else working in you, and a rather nasty something at that. You do not so much kick against the pricks, as try to propitiate them.... Let him think as seems right to him. That's his business.... Since you know yourself to be in the right, stick to it, whatever others may write about it, however it makes them suffer.... '*The salt of life consists in dignified protest, my friend.*" (The italics is mine.—*Author.*)

This respect for *strength* in Chekhov is highly significant. Though his father's views are hostile to his own, he values him for his firmness, and calls upon his brother

to display an equal firmness as to his own views. The remark that dignified protest constitutes the salt of life is of the utmost importance for the understanding of Chekhov's psychology. This idea underlies everything he wrote, it can be traced every time he censures spineless intellectualism. A half-hearted, timid protest is worth nothing in his opinion, and only shows that the slave in the protesting soul has not been overcome.

Chekhov's solicitude for his brother's dignity was at the same time solicitude for his talent as a writer. In Alexander's stories Anton Pavlovich criticized first and foremost the still unconquered slavish traits. In a letter to Alexander of the same April 1883, he tactfully alludes to these traits as "subjectivism," advising his brother: "Only be as honest as possible. Keep yourself in the background, don't make yourself the hero of your story, try to forget yourself for the space of one half-hour at least. You have a story in which a honeymoon couple kiss, sing and prattle all through a dinner.... Not a word that means anything, nothing but complacency! You were not thinking of the reader when you wrote that story, you only wrote it because this twaddle amused you. You should have described the dinner, how they ate, what they ate, what the cook was like, the vulgarity of your hero, content with his languid bliss, the vulgarity of the heroine with her absurd infatuation for this well-fed, over-stuffed goose with his napkin tucked under his chin."

Something reminiscent of this fraternal correspondence is found in a conversation between the Laptev brothers in *Three Years*. After reading an article written by his brother Fyodor in the Slavophile spirit, Alexei says to him: "But it's a flunkey's ravings and nothing more!" Chekhov is more tactful, but the purport of the reproaches he addresses to his brother is the same. Flunkeyism is hydra-headed, it can show itself in complacent admiration of the joys of well-nourished vulgarity. The feelings

of Alexei Laptev, when faced with the bitter fact that his brother, notwithstanding his University education, is still essentially a slave, were very close to those of Chekhov himself.

The middle-class flavour in Alexander's writings showed that Alexander had succumbed to Leikinism, that he had not been able to resist it, and was in danger of becoming a middle-class, bourgeois writer. Anton Pavlovich waged war against "Leikinism" even in the bosom of his own family.

Protesting against the middle-class "acquired subjectivism" in his brother's stories, Chekhov at the same time demanded that he remain himself in his art, not distorting or forgetting the good in him. Anton Pavlovich was well aware that there was much that was good, pure and talented in his brother. He considered Alexander capable of becoming a first-rate writer. In answer to a birthday letter from Alexander in 1886, Anton Pavlovich wrote: "Your letter is devilishly, infernally, monstrously artistic. Can't you see that if you could only write stories as well as you write letters, you would long ago have been a great man, a colossus?"

Alexander's letter is indeed remarkable. It shows clearly how richly its author had been endowed by nature. It is full of childhood reminiscences, describing the first time Alexander realized that his independent younger brother Anton was escaping from his influence, how sad it had made him at the time—he had all but wept over it. There is many an artistic touch in the letter, much humour and poetry, and it is saturated with subtle, mellow, restrained sadness, nowhere expressed in actual words, over the fact that the Anton of today has outstripped him, Alexander, who had once seemed so full of promise and was now entering upon the fourth decade of his life without having done anything special. The memory of his childish grief blends imperceptibly with the melan-

choly of the mature man. Anton Pavlovich was, of course, perfectly capable of reading between the lines, of discerning his brother's ruthless self-criticism, and as an artist he could not help appreciating the subtlety, the intelligent, wistful humour with which it was expressed.

To be able to write stories as one writes letters means to be able to reveal one's soul as Alexander had done in his letter and at the same time not to impose one's own personality upon the reader: give the reader a chance to forget you and see life as it is—the shop in Taganrog, childhood games and quarrels, and let the secret imperceptible music in the artist's soul permeate your story.

Art demands many feats from the artist, one of them being the ability to expose his innermost soul ruthlessly.

But it was not often that Alexander was able to write stories as he wrote letters. In other words, he usually stopped being himself, his sincerity deserted him, when he sat down to write a story.

If Chekhov's scattered, isolated thoughts on art, on the artist's duty, expressed in the course of his prolonged struggle in defence of the talents of his brothers and of other people dear to his heart, could be collected, the result would be a complete doctrine of the nature of the artistic gift.

Of the gifted author Gilyarovsky, Chekhov wrote to Pleshcheyev: "He feels the beauty in other men's works; he is conscious that the chief charm of a story is simplicity and sincerity, but lacks the courage to be simple and sincere in his own writings."

Chekhov demanded courage of the artist, for talent is courage.

We know that for Chekhov talent is above all inextricably bound up with human feelings, with a high ethical standard. In his story *Violent Sensations*, written in 1886, one of the series of stories devoted to the theme of talent, we read that talent is an elemental force, it is a hurricane

capable of grinding stones into dust; it is a force capable of creating all and of destroying all, and it would be indeed a terrible force if, fortunately for humanity, talent were not accompanied by lofty humane feeling. Talent and humane feelings are, according to Chekhov, indissoluble, the former never existing without the latter.

Anton Pavlovich strove to cultivate in his brothers above all those qualities which, to use Chekhov's favourite expression, every *well-bred* person, whether talented or not, ought to possess. A gifted person bears double responsibility, and must be irreproachably well bred. In a letter to his brother Nikolai, written in 1886, Chekhov expounds his moral code.

"You are always complaining of being 'misunderstood'!" he writes. "... I assure you that as your brother and friend I understand you and sympathize with you with all my heart.... I know your good qualities as well as I know the fingers on my hand; I appreciate them and respect them profoundly. If you like, I can enumerate them to prove that I understand you. I consider you too kind, generous, unselfish, ready to part with your last kopek, sincere; you know neither envy nor rancour, are innocent, kind to animals and humans alike, are devoid of spite and vindictiveness, have a trustful heart.... You are endowed with something which others have not got: you have talent."

All these are excellent qualities which Chekhov held in great esteem. But they all weighed little in his eyes when compared to good breeding.

"You have only one defect, and your false position, your sad plight, your stomach ulcers come from it. And that is—your excessive lack of breeding. Don't be angry with me, but *veritas magis amicitiae....*"

"Well-bred people," writes Chekhov, "respect other people's individuality, and are therefore always indulgent, gentle, polite and accommodating.... They" (Che-

khov alludes to Nikolai himself.—*Author.*) "never make a row over the hammer being mislaid or a rubber they cannot find; if they live with anyone they do not make a favour of it, and when they go away, they do not say: 'You're impossible to live with!' They can bear noise and cold, and ... witticisms, they can put up with the presence of strangers in the house.... They can feel pity not only for beggars and cats. Their heart bleeds for that which lies under the surface.... They are candid and avoid lies like the plague. They do not even lie about trifles. Lies are insulting to the listener and demean the one who utters them. They do not give themselves airs, away from home they behave as they do at home, they do not swagger in front of their inferiors. They are not garrulous and do not bore others with uninvited confidences. They do not court sympathy by humbling themselves. They do not attempt to play on people's feelings in order to wring sighs and attention out of them. They do not exclaim: 'Nobody understands me!' or 'I have squandered my gifts on trifles!' for this smacks of cheap effect, it is vulgar, hackneyed and false.... They are not vain. They are not deluded by false diamonds, such as getting to know celebrities....

"... When they have done a trifling spell of work they do not strut about with their portfolios" (Nikolai was an artist.—*Author.*) "as if they contained masterpieces, and they do not boast of being admitted where others are not admitted.... True genius prefers to remain in the shade, among the crowd, it does not care for exhibitions.... Has not Krylov said that an empty barrel makes more noise than a full one? If they have talent, they respect it. They sacrifice to it peace, love, wine and vanity.... They are proud of it, conscious that they are called upon to influence and educate others.... And then they are fastidious. They train their aesthetic feelings. They cannot bear to sleep with their clothes on, to see bugs in a crack in

the wall, to breathe foul air, to walk over a filthy floor.... They try to tame and elevate their sexual instincts. They want from women not the pleasures of the bed and animal sweat, not mere brilliance showing itself in the ability to lie indefatigably. What they want, especially those who are artists, is freshness, grace, humanity, the makings of a good mother.... They do not swill vodka wherever they go, sniffing at cupboard doors, for they know they are not mere swine.... They may drink sometimes, in spare moments, on certain occasions.... For they must have *mens sana in corpore sano.*

"And so on, and so on. Such are the well-bred. To achieve good breeding and not fall beneath the standard of the society in which you find yourself, it is not enough to have read the *Pickwick Papers* or learnt a monologue from *Faust* by heart.... It takes continuous effort, day and night, constant reading, study, will.... Every hour of your life is precious."

Chekhov called upon his brother to "chuck everything, make a thorough break. Come back to us, break your decanter of vodka. I'm waiting for you.... We all are."

But he waited in vain.

He was deeply devoted to his brother and his brother's talent, which was distinguished by a subtle grace. Nikolai's caricatures, exposing the trading, petty-bourgeois, middle-class Moscow of the eighties, were acute and intuitive and full of subtle elegance; they are excellent material for a study of the times. The nature of his talent is greatly akin to that of his brilliant brother. In his drawings there is none of the crudity and bald naturalism shown by some of his colleagues on *Strekoza.* Like Antosha Chekhontey he transformed crude nature by the light of poetry and the true Chekhov humour.

Levitan appreciated Nikolai's talent, and they sometimes helped one another in their work.

Nikolai did some illustrations for the Antosha Chekhontey stories. There was a period when all three Chekhov brothers were working for the same humorous journal *Zritel* in Moscow.

Antosha Chekhontey delighted in the co-operation; it reminded him of the fascinating, whole-hearted games, jokes and pranks of their childhood and adolescence. He was proud of his brother's talent. Nikolai tried his hand at big canvases and here, too, displayed a certain brilliance.

And yet he continued to drink away his talents, laying them waste. Chekhov looked on with pain, grief and anger.

In an attic at the top of the little house in Sadovo-Kudrinskaya Street, Moscow, where Anton Pavlovich lived with his mother, father, sister and brother Mikhail, stood a large unfinished painting by Nikolai Chekhov of a seamstress fallen asleep over her work at the break of day. It is probably of this picture that Anton Pavlovich wrote in a letter to his brother in April 1883: "Nikolai is fooling about; a good, powerful Russian talent is being destroyed, is perishing in vain. You have seen his present work. What is he doing? Everything that is vulgar and cheap. And in the meantime an excellent painting stands unfinished in the hall."

The subject of the painting is a typically Chekhov one: love for the simple "little" men and women with their hard life. The "fooling about" of Nikolai was, in the eyes of Anton Pavlovich, a failure to recognize his obligation to the millions of "little" men, the obligation imposed upon him by his own talent—and for Chekhov talent included a sense of obligation to the people, to the cause of Russian art, Russian culture, a *national* sense of obligation.

Anton Pavlovich's letter to Nikolai was a serious and —while outwardly reserved—a bold step, when one re-

members Nikolai's morbid vanity, hot temper and intolerance.

The letter is a veritable well of wisdom. How wisely Anton Pavlovich distinguished Nikolai's *natural* gifts, which had never cost him an effort, from those qualities which need cultivation. Culture is that which man introduces into nature, at the same time changing her. For Chekhov, a well-bred man and a cultured man were synonymous terms. And he could not, therefore, regard anyone who had graduated from a University as necessarily a cultured man.

To be kind and gifted like Nikolai demanded no effort; he was born that way. But to be worthy of one's gift, to become not merely gifted, but a talented worker, one has to cultivate one's gift, work at it.

Talent is really the cultivation of talent.

Nikolai cared little for all that. He had no respect for his own talent.

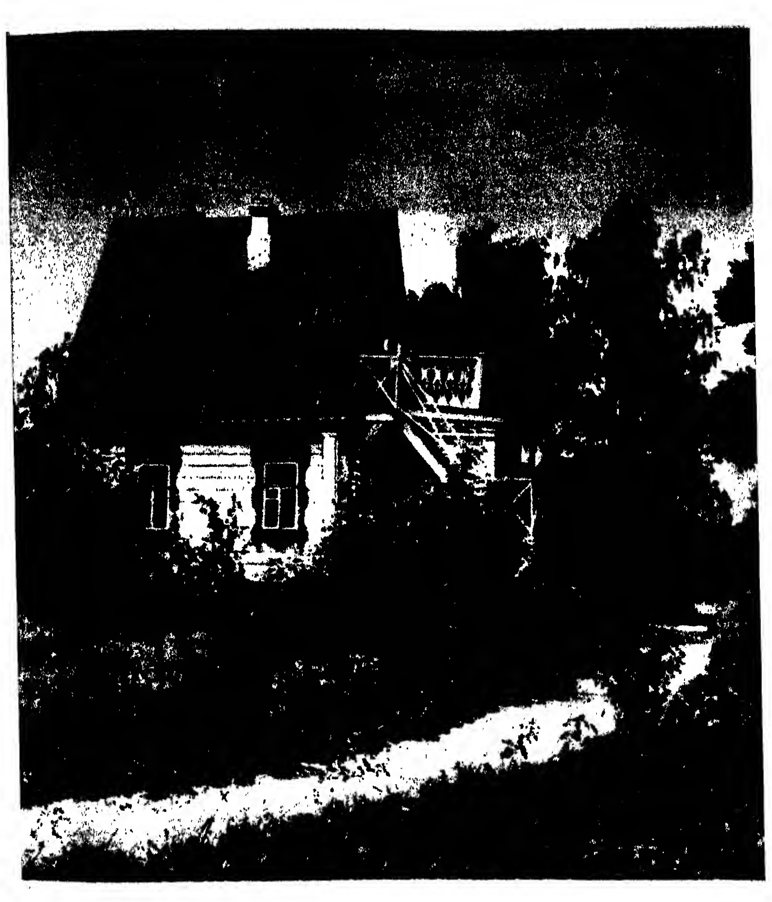
He read little, only worked when he felt "inspired," and by the time he reached his twenty-seventh year, had ceased to make any progress.

Unlike Nikolai, Alexander Pavlovich was a well-educated man. The possessor of a wonderful memory, he was a walking encyclopedia. He was a gifted chemist, knew philosophy, history, linguistics. Eminent scientists clamoured for Alexander Chekhov to report the special sittings of scientific societies, for he was quite at home in the most complicated scientific problems.

But he lacked the "general idea," a systematic outlook. His work as an author was not inspired by a great aim, passion, aspirations.

"Do you know what talent is?" Yelena Andreyevna asks Sonya in *Uncle Vanya.* "It is courage, an independent mind, wide range. . . ."

"He has great talent," Chekhov wrote of Bilibin, "but no knowledge of life whatever, and where there is no



Chekhov's home at Melikhovo where during the summer of 1896 he wrote *The Sea-gull*

Chekhov's house stood on the bank of this pond at Melikhovo

knowledge, there can be no courage." Talent is knowledge of life. Talent is courage.

Alexander confessed to Anton Pavlovich that he did not know life well enough. This may sound paradoxical: a reporter for *Novoye Vremya*, one of the biggest papers in the capital, who from the very nature of his profession should be "in the know," sighing that his knowledge of life was inadequate! What knowledge he had was superficial. He did not take part in life, he merely observed it.

Talent is freedom, "freedom from passions," as Chekhov wrote, not meaning those great creative passions without which talent could not exist, but the unbridled primitive passions.

His elder brothers were, alas, slaves to their passions, to their ever-changing moods, to drink.

Talent is *work*.

Gorky, who understood the value of work and workers, wrote of Chekhov:

"I never met anyone who felt the significance of work as the basis of culture so profoundly and thoroughly as Anton Pavlovich."

For both writers, Chekhov and Gorky, work was the main thing in the life both of the individual and the whole of humanity. For these two, nothing was more beautiful, noble and humane, than work.

Bunin tells us that at his very first meeting with Chekhov the latter asked him whether he wrote much.

"I told him I did not.

" 'That's a pity,' he said almost curtly in his deep-chested baritone. 'People must work, you know.... Incessantly.... All their lives.' "

These were favourite themes with Chekhov—the need to "work incessantly" and to be simple and truthful to the point of asceticism in one's work.

He was fond of reiterating that if a writer does not work and live constantly in that artistic atmosphere

which alone keeps the artist's eye open, be he as wise as Solomon, he will soon begin to feel hollow and mediocre.

Sometimes Chekhov would take a notebook from a drawer in his desk, and, looking up, his pince-nez gleaming, wave it in the air, exclaiming:

"A hundred themes, no less! Yes, sir! I'm a worker! Would you care to buy a couple?"

Chekhov began to train himself to form habits of incessant work from the age of sixteen, and by the time he was twenty-one had acquired them to perfection, and was trying to get his brothers to train their will and form similar habits. He was never weary of ruthlessly exposing Alexander's lack of will for real work.

"All the stories you sent me for Leikin," he wrote to his brother in April 1886, "were tainted with laziness. Did you write them all in one day? I could only find one really good, talented story among them all. . . . The rest is all laziness, unthinking, impulsive work, achieving nothing. . . . Do have some respect for yourself, for Christ's sake! Don't let your hands work when your brain is too lazy to work! Don't write more than two stories a week, prune them, work on them, and let it be real work!"

In another letter Chekhov tells his brother, returning him his manuscript:

"In the first place try and think of another title for your story. And make it shorter, Brother, shorter. . . . Cut it down to less than half its present length. And don't be angry with me, but I consider that stories with nothing crossed out or altered in them cannot be any good."

For all his tremendous work, which, after graduating from the University, he combined for some years with medical practice, Chekhov always managed to read a great deal, not merely swallowing books, but studying them diligently, as he recommended Nikolai to do.

"An artist," he said, "must always be working, always thinking, for that is the only way he can live."

"I observed a characteristic trait in Chekhov," Tikhonov, one of those who knew him well, remembered. "He was always thinking, every minute, every second. Whether listening to an amusing story, telling one himself, seated among friends at the festive board, talking to a woman, or playing with a dog, Chekhov was always thinking. Owing to this he would often break off in the middle of a sentence, put an apparently irrelevant question, and sometimes appear absent-minded. Owing to this, in the midst of conversation he would suddenly seat himself at the table, and scribble something on his scraps of note-paper; owing to this, while facing you, he would suddenly seem to be looking deep within himself."

"A writer should cultivate an active, untiring observer in himself," Chekhov had said to Shcheglov. "He should so train himself, you know, as to make this a habit, second nature."

All his life he worked at training himself to be a writer, and always it seemed to him that as a writer he was an "utter dunce."

"Dissatisfaction with oneself is one of the fundamental qualities of every true talent," Chekhov wrote to the actor Svobodin. Dissatisfaction with his own work was exceedingly characteristic of himself.

"I think that if I could live forty years more," he wrote in 1889, "and spend all those forty years reading, reading and reading, and learning to write well, that is tersely, I would at the end of that time shoot at you all from such an enormous gun that the heavens would quake. Now, I am a Lilliputian like the rest."

His self-dissatisfaction did not weaken with the years, but increased. Even after he had become a celebrated writer, he writes in a letter to Suvorin (December 1889) that he had not as yet written "a single line," which in his own eyes "had any serious literary significance.... I

need to study, to learn the very rudiments, for as an author I am an utter dunce."

Throughout his life he subjected himself, in the light of conscience, to tests of ever-increasing severity, perpetually setting himself tasks of ever-increasing complexity.

He was severe and implacable in everything pertaining to work. How scathingly he reprimanded the lovely Lika Mizinova with whom he was on terms half-friendly, half-amorous, when she did not finish in time a translation she had undertaken to do!

"You don't seem to feel the slightest need for regular work.... Mind you don't anger me by laziness another time and please don't make excuses. When it is a matter of urgent work and a promise, I will accept no excuses. I neither accept, nor understand them."

Chekhov judged individuals almost entirely by their attitude to work. This crops up constantly in his writings.

Talent is work. Talent is responsibility; talent is conscience. "An author," wrote Chekhov in 1887 to his Babkino friend Kiselyova, "is a person under an obligation, bound by his sense of duty and his conscience."

Talent is strength, endurance.

With all his affection for his brothers, Chekhov repressed his sympathy with their frequent complains of the hardships of their life, of their failures with publishers and elsewhere, of their poverty, their wounded vanity, their loneliness, boredom, etc.

He was perfectly aware that the complaints of Alexander, who was treated as a mere newspaper hack, were not groundless. Nevertheless, he would often rebuke him for his weakness when he felt in the nature of the complaint itself a weakening of the will to work.

He never complained!

And yet his life from childhood to the very last years was saturated with suffering, privation and difficulties of all sorts.

"In a letter to old A. S. Suvorin," remarks Gorky, "Chekhov wrote: 'There is nothing more boring and less poetic than the prosaic struggle for existence, robbing life of all joy and leaving one quite apathetic....' For him this 'struggle for existence' manifested itself in his youth in the form of ugly, colourless, everyday petty worries about food, and that not for himself alone. To these cares, unrelieved by any joy, he had to give all the strength of his youth, and it is surprising that he was able to keep his sense of humour."

"Chekhov's reserve," said the writer Ivan Bunin, "is a testimony to the wonderful power of his personality. Whoever heard him complain? And he had plenty to complain of. He began his work in the midst of a large family, suffering want all through his youth, and he not only worked for the most wretched pay, but in an environment which might have damped the most ardent inspiration: in a tiny apartment, amidst hubbub and loud talk, often sitting at the very end of a table around which were gathered not only the entire family but a number of student boarders. Even later he endured a long period of want. But no one ever heard him rail against his fate, and this not because his standards were low; though leading a life of rare and lofty simplicity, he nevertheless detested bleakness and drabness.... For fifteen years he suffered from an exhausting disease which led him implacably to the grave.... Sick persons are apt to enjoy their privileged position and to find pleasure in tormenting everyone round them with incessant, irritable complaints of their disease; but the courage displayed by Chekhov during his illness and in his dying hours was truly marvellous! He might be suffering acutely, and yet it was very seldom that anyone suspected it.

" 'Don't you feel well, Antosha?' his mother or sister would ask, noticing how he sat all day in his arm-chair with closed eyes.

" 'Me?' he would say quietly, opening his eyes, so clear and mild without the pince-nez. 'It's nothing. My head aches rather.' "

All who knew Chekhov intimately admired his moral strength.

"My strong one," O. L. Knipper-Chekhova addressed him in one of her letters. "You are a strong man, you can endure anything in silence," she said in another.

But this strength, too, was by no means "inborn." Chekhov had cultivated it, trained it by constant labour. Everything he possessed he had had to pay for with toil and sacrifices.

He was well aware that talent was not enough. But he knew, also, that talent was much!

In the series of stories on the subject of talent there is one which may be considered as dedicated to his brother Nikolai. It is entitled *Talent* (1886). The fact that Chekhov gave so much thought to the question of what constitutes talent in this same year 1886—witness his letter to Nikolai, the stories *Violent Sensations*, *Talent*, the letter to Alexander, etc.—is apparently not to be ascribed to mere chance. This year, made memorable by the letter from Grigorovich, was also noteworthy for an enhanced sense of the obligations his talent as a writer had imposed on him.

In *Talent* Chekhov described a circle of "promising" artists—how many he must have met among Nikolai's friends! It is a sad story, ruthlessly sober in the Chekhov way.

"The colleagues, all three, pace the floor like wolves in a cage. They talk incessantly, earnestly, ardently, all three are excited, inspired. If one were to believe them, a great future, fame, and money awaited them. And not one of them stopped for a moment to think that the days were passing, every day bringing them nearer to sunset, that they had partaken abundantly of the bread of others, and

had done nothing as yet; not one of the three seemed to realize that they were all victims of the inexorable law, according to which out of every hundred promising beginners, only two or three are destined to come to anything, the rest peter out and perish, having served as mere grist...." In the original draft of the story, the words "and not one of them stopped to think" are followed by "that all their excitement was nothing but a trivial, childish game at being artists...." However gifted a man may be, without work his talent is a mere childish playing with talent.

Talent demands constant care. To paraphrase a saying of Goethe's, he only is worthy of his own talent, who fights for it every day.

To be worthy of one's own talent means to become harmoniously fused with it, to become a worthy human being, to purify all one's thoughts and feelings, to raise oneself to the level of one's talent. Where there is a breach between a man and his talent, there can only be that species of brittle cleverness which is worse than mediocrity. Talent must "fit" the man perfectly. The simile belongs to Chekhov's intelligent brother, Alexander. It is possible that Alexander himself did not thoroughly realize the tragic import of his own idea. In some facetious verses which he wrote for Chekhov's birthday in 1885, he says that of the five brothers Anton Pavlovich was the only one whose talent fitted him "as the frock-coat fits the dandy," and goes on to bewail his own insignificance.

It is quite true that talent did not "fit" the brothers of Anton Pavlovich. It sat badly on them, was tight here, loose there, did not seem to be part of them, cramped their movements, as they cramped its development. Anton Pavlovich, by Herculean efforts, became fused with his talent. The greater the talent, the greater the work it demands of its owner!

Alexander Pavlovich, a gifted, kind-hearted, weak man, had, alas, led a life unworthy of his talent. He became a hack, a humble newspaper pariah. Never thinking of his attitude to life in general, he sank lower and lower, forgetting the poetry which had once had its source in his heart. He was unable to break away from Suvorin's *Novoye Vremya*, despite the warnings of Anton Pavlovich, who had himself been connected with the paper for a certain period and had made a clean break with it and its editor when the development of his political and social outlook brought him to this determination. Alexander Pavlovich always maintained the philistine indifference to politics so typical of the epoch in which he grew up. In the simplicity of his heart he believed *Novoye Vremya* to be "the best Russian newspaper."

His old age was desolate and melancholy. Accustomed to consider himself an honest worker, he was suddenly forced to realize, during the years of revolutionary uplift preceding the revolution itself, that almost everyone in Russia despised those who wrote for *Novoye Vremya*. The discovery, coming upon him in his old age, could not but shake him. Though he had been merely a reporter, and never an "ideologist," he was made to share the general contempt. And yet, ill, and the victim of drink, he had not the strength and resolution to break with *Novoye Vremya*.

His is the typical story of the "little" man, ruined by the dark forces of that accursed world against which his brother waged war.

Alexander Chekhov died in 1913, in perfect obscurity, having written a few stories which were almost good, many talented letters to Anton Pavlovich, and numbers of undistinguished pot-boilers.

His is the story of a man unable to master his own talent, who deserted creative art for mere hack work.

The story of Nikolai Chekhov is still more tragic,

He died early, at the age of thirty-one. Drinking brought on an aggravation of his pulmonary complaint.

Though he had displayed a much more striking talent than his brother Alexander, his is also the story of one unable to master his own talent.

How many such stories were repeated, some recorded, others not, in that era!

Anton Pavlovich felt a responsibility for the vainly wasted creative forces of such hosts of talented beings. A secret voice, the voice of his conscience, whispered to him that he must work for them all. And work he did, never complaining of the weight imposed upon him by history —great toiler, modest Russian as he was.

HARD TIMES

The end of the eighties was a period of great internal strain for Chekhov.

On the surface he seemed to be content and even happy.

He lived with his family on Sadovo-Kudrinskaya Street, renting a two-storey house which was "like a chest of drawers." Young people drifted to the house. Upstairs they played on the upright piano (also rented), sang, talked eagerly and loudly, and downstairs, to the din of music and laughter, Chekhov sat at his desk, writing. Sometimes he mounted the stairs to take an active part in the gaieties.

The "Sadovo-Kudrinskaya period" of his life seemed to be full of joy.

These years were marked by two stories which belong to the most poetic work he did, vivid, powerful, of extraordinary scope and breadth. These were *Happiness* and *The Steppe.*

There is happiness in the world, but it is buried deep in the ground, like the mysterious treasures hidden in the steppe. No one knows how to set about looking for happiness. A mood of meditative, tranquil melancholy pervades the story.

" 'There *is* happiness,' says an old shepherd, 'but what is the good of it, if it is buried in the ground? There it lies rotting, useless—like chaff or sheep dung! And there is much happiness in the world, my lad, enough for the

whole district, but nobody can see it! It will end in the gentry getting hold of it, or the State. The gentry have begun digging up the barrows.... They have smelled it out! They are jealous of our muzhik happiness! The State knows what's what, too. It says in the law that if a muzhik finds a treasure he must report it to his superiors! They'll never live to see us do that—no fear!'

"The old man laughed scornfully and sat down on the ground."

The ancient belief of the peasants that there is enough happiness on the earth for everybody, if the gentry did not monopolize it, and their dogged, desperate search for happiness, are poetically expressed in this story.

" 'Truth to say, I myself have tried to find it, I've been at it ten times during my life,' said the old man, scratching his head in his embarrassment. 'And I went to the right places, too, but those treasures must have been bewitched. My father searched and my brother—and they found nothing, and died without finding their happiness....'

"... The overseer, waking from his reverie, jerked back his head....

" 'That's it,' he said, 'so near and yet so far.... *There's happiness enough, but we don't know how to look for it.*'

"He turned his face towards the shepherds. The expression of his austere countenance was at once sad and ironical, like that of a disappointed man.

" 'Ah me, we shall die without even seeing this happiness, without knowing what it's like...' he said slowly, lifting his left foot to the stirrup. 'Perhaps the younger ones will find it one day, but it's time for us to forget about it.'

"... The rooks woke up and began flying over the field, one by one and in silence. Neither in the lazy flight of the long-lived birds, in the dawn, breaking day after day so punctually, nor in the boundless expanse of the steppe

was any sense to be discerned. The overseer chuckled mournfully, exclaiming:

" 'Just look at it all, good Lord! Try and find happiness in this wide world!' "

There's happiness enough, but we don't know how to look for it. I have italicized these words, which may be regarded as a kind of motto for the whole work of Chekhov. Therein lies the clue to the inner light illuminating all his work, the key to his profound optimism, and also to the profound sadness filling all the works of this great interpreter of the difficult transitory age in which he lived. The constancy, what may almost be called the obstinacy, of Chekhov's faith in happiness, in a life in this world which should be beautiful, rational, pure, finally becoming universal, is truly remarkable. At the same time his grief that there are no paths to happiness, that no one "knows how to look for it," no answer to the question, what must be done to find this happiness for which everyone longed, for which the steppe—another symbol of Life—was pining, is equally strong and insistent. In the two stories, *Happiness* and *The Steppe*, the steppe is made to symbolize life, the native land, pining for happiness. There is no meaning in this boundlessness, this enchanted space, if there is no happiness, no key to it, no path to it! Everything longs for happiness, for meaning, for that *ruling principle*, so ardently sought by all Chekhov characters, everything is rapt with expectation, with a trance of anticipation and sadness. And this it is which creates the lyrical, melodious atmosphere of *Happiness.*

Are not the belief in happiness and the regret that no one "knows how to look for it" the most salient, characteristic features of Chekhov's works, of his characters? Where is happiness concealed? How is one to get at it? It is not only the old shepherd or the overseer Panteleі in *Happiness* who ponder over this; all Chekhov's characters think of it, long for it.

But Chekhov's sober scepticism has nothing in common with the cynical scepticism of decadent writers; it is a vigorous scepticism, the irony of ruthlessly sober realism, introducing a note of gentle derision into the lyrical atmosphere of *Happiness*. This note is also extremely significant, extremely characteristic of Chekhov's work. It springs from his desire for action, from his clear understanding that the passive expectation of happiness, the blind hope for a miracle must be relegated to the past, forgotten. And Chekhov is right when he likens the thoughts of the shepherds to the ruminating of their flocks. There is a dreamy torpor about their thoughts. No, no, there must be other paths to happiness! There is a glimpse—highly significant, transient though it is—of another life, another path, opposed to quiet, lazy, reflective dreaminess. "The sun had not yet risen, but all the barrows were visible, and the cone-shaped Saur Funeral Mound showed cloud-like in the distance. From its top could be seen the entire plain, boundless and monotonous as the sky itself, the landowners' estates, the farmsteads of the Germans and Sectarians, and the villages; the sharp-eyed Kalmyk could even make out the town and the trains. Only from there could it be seen that there was another life in this world, different from that of the silent steppe and ancient barrows, a life which had nothing to do with hidden treasures and sheep-like ruminating."

There are many profound and beautiful thoughts expressed in *Happiness*, this prose poem, and very likely the author himself would not have been able to translate his poetical images into the language of logic. The powerful longing of the steppe for some sort of "meaning" to be introduced into its boundless spaces, as yet mysterious in their power and beauty, and the distant din of a pulsing life, not merged with the life of the steppe, the profound and poetical sympathy with the peasants' dream

of happiness, the sober smile at its vagueness and unattainability—how poetical, how highly artistic, how significant it all is! The same motifs, in all sorts of variations, are to be found in almost every work of the mature Chekhov, so that we are justified in regarding the music of *Happiness* as an overture in which all the main motifs of the great poet's works are to be found. These motifs are tinged with an austere melancholy, as in *Dull Story*, with sadness and hope, as in the play *The Sea-gull*. While in the story *Official Business*, the motif of *Happiness* and *The Steppe*—the longing for a great light which would illuminate the "meaning," the purpose, the very pathos of life, so mysterious in its boundlessness, its infinite beauty and yearning—has another ring; it is no longer a question, but an answer; later, in *The Cherry Orchard* and *The Bride* there will be, as well as sadness and hope, the strong feeling of impending victory.

The Steppe is akin to *Happiness* in its tense poetical feeling. But in *The Steppe* there is also a strong epic note.

It is a powerful, solemn hymn to the joyousness of life, to nature, to the greatness of the native land.

A new Chekhov is revealed to the reader, Chekhov the poet of joy.

Impressions of childhood, refreshed in his memory by a visit to his birthplace in the summer of 1887, enabled him to reproduce the purity and freshness of child's conception of the world, combined with the mature outlook of the artist.

The hero of the story is the little Yegorushka; his uncle takes him to town, in order to put him in a school. *The Steppe* is filled with the buoyancy of youth, the thrilling freshness of its perceptions and emotions. We breathe the fragrance of the steppe grass and flowers, we feel with our whole being the beauty and boundlessness of life.

And the steppe comes to life as an exquisite being, yearning for happiness, we seem to see the heavings of its bosom. We hardly notice how this vivid image merges into the image of the native land itself, yearning for happiness, too.

"On one goes, hour after hour.... A silent ancient barrow appears, then a stone woman, placed there no one knows by whom and when, a nocturnal bird floats soundlessly over the earth, and the ancient legends of the steppe, stories heard from passers-by, fairy-tales told by one's nurse, herself a native of the steppe, everything one has seen and imbibed so far, flock into one's memory. And then the chirping of insects, the mysterious images and barrows, the blue sky, the moonlight, the flight of the nocturnal bird, every sight and sound, begin to take on the image of triumphant beauty, youth, the heyday of life, the passionate zest for life; the heart goes out to one's beautiful, austere native land, and one longs to fly over the steppe beside the nocturnal bird. In this very triumph of the beautiful, this excess of joy there is a kind of tenseness and sadness; it is as though the steppe itself is conscious that ... all her riches, all her inspiration are wasted...."

The irrepressible longing of the great country for a life worthy of its wealth and inspiration, for the crowning of its creative forces, breathes through the Chekhov landscape.

Grief and bitterness that the wealth and inspiration of the lovely native land, her creative powers should be wasted, the yearning for the day which was sure to come, when the Russian bogatyr would stand upright, this note of grief and yearning had long been sounded in Russian literature. Chekhov seems to be calling to Gogol over the space of many decades. The dreams of Gogol and Chekhov seem to merge in a single hymn to their country and its future.

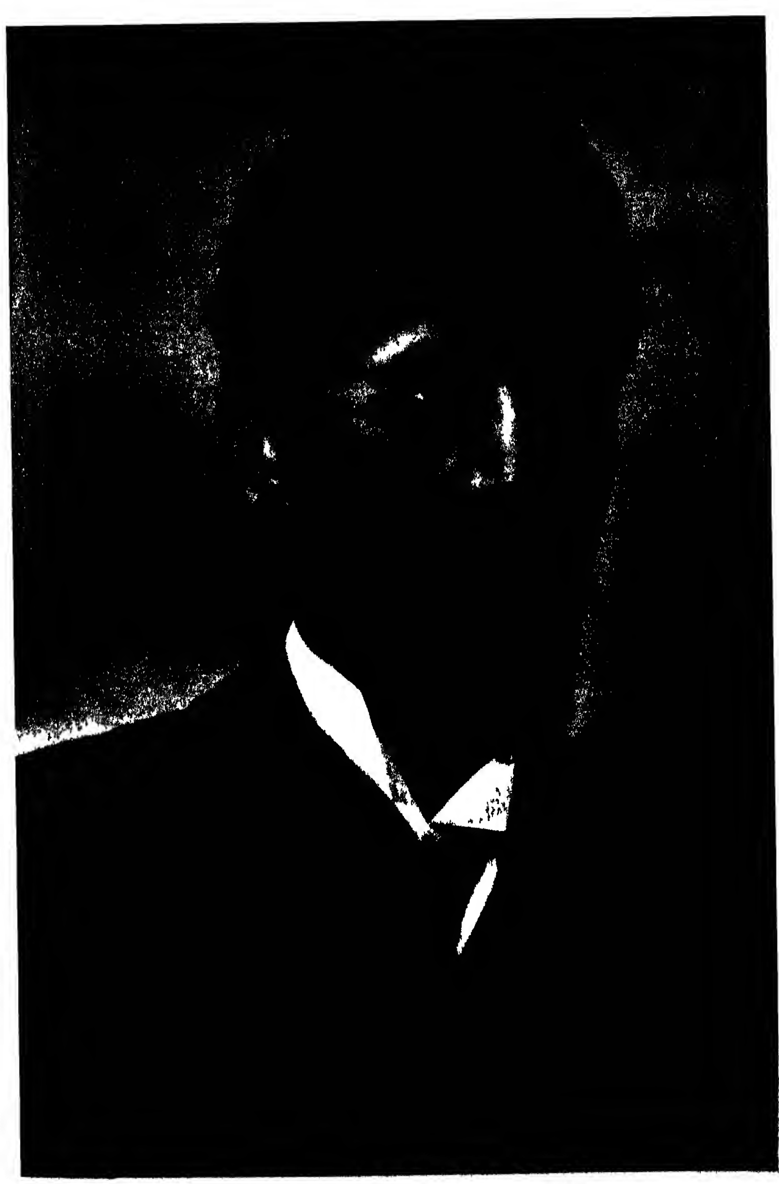
"... Still full of bewilderment, I stand motionless; my head is overshadowed by a storm-cloud, heavy with rain yet to fall, my mind stunned by your boundless space. What does all this infinite expanse predict? It is surely here, from out of your boundless spaces, that infinite thought must be born! It is surely here, where he can move and stride to his heart's content, that the bogatyr ought to appear! The powerful expanse embraces me, filling my soul with its awful strength; my eyes shine with unnatural brightness.... Oh, how the divine distance, unknown to the world, gleams! Rūs!" (Gogol).

And now Chekhov—one great Russian poet answering another.

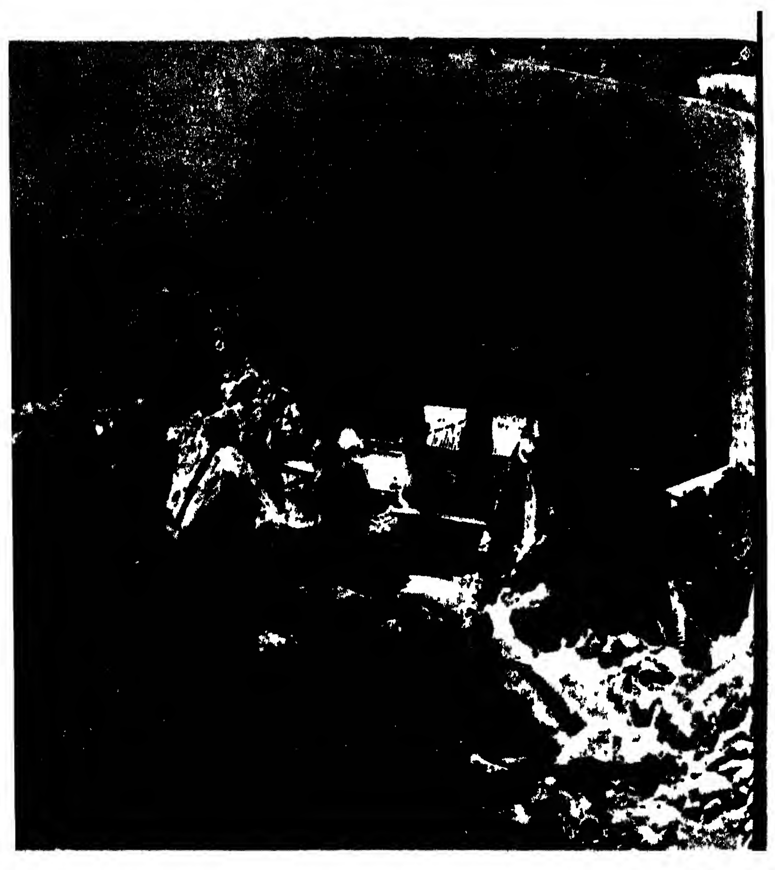
"Something extraordinarily wide and sweeping, something *bogatyrean* wound over the steppe like a road; it was a grey strip, well-trodden and dusty, like any other road, only it was several yards wide. Its width aroused Yegorushka's bewilderment, suggesting fantastic, fairy-tale visions. Who drives along that road? Who needs all that space? Strange and incomprehensible! It made you think that those bogatyrs striding along, like Ilya Muromets and Solovei-Razboinik, had not disappeared from Rūs, and that their gigantic steeds were still alive. Yegorushka, gazing at the road, imagined six tall chariots like those he had seen in the pictures in the Bible driving along at a gallop, side by side; to each chariot were harnessed six steeds, wild, savage beasts, the high wheels raised clouds of dust to the sky, and the horses were driven by men only seen in dreams or imagined in fantastic musings. And how well those figures would have suited the steppe and the road, if only they really existed!"

The *bogatyrean* scope was what suited the native land!

Just as the inspiration of the steppe is wasted, the wonderful power of men like the indomitable Dimov, one



A. P. Chekhov



House where Chekhov lived in Gurzuf, Crimea

of the most fascinating characters in *The Steppe*, of whom Chekhov wrote in a letter that "people like him were made for the revolution," is wasted, too. But there had as yet been no revolution, and the "bogatyrean" energy of the many Dimovs is doomed to waste and rot.

The steppe, which is life itself, awaits its poet. It awaits its lawful master. But at present its master is Varlamov, with his arid nature, his fanatical devotion to business, his indifference to the beauty of the steppe, the beauty of life. How prosaic he is, how crude, how unsuited to the beauty around him is all his bustling activity, his hovering over the steppe, like a bird of prey! Displeased with one of his overseers Varlamov raised his whip, shouting angrily at him: "Take yourself off!" "Varlamov's words to the overseer and the raising of his whip, seemed to have had a depressing effect on everyone in the carts. All faces were grave. The overseer, disconcerted by the wrath of the great man, stood by the front cart, with his cap off, the reins drooping in his hand; he said not a word and seemed unable to believe the day had begun so badly for him."

Up till now, Yegorushka had not seen Varlamov, "though he had often heard of him, and tried every now and then to imagine what he was like. He knew that Varlamov owned thousands of dessiatins of land, almost a hundred thousand sheep and any amount of money; the only other thing he knew about him was that he was always hovering about these parts, and that people were constantly trying to find him."

"The kite hovers close to the ground, flapping its wings rhythmically, and all of a sudden it soars motionless in the air as if contemplating the boredom of existence, then, flapping its wings, it darts like an arrow above the steppe, and no one knows what makes it fly, or what it wants. And in the distance the sails of a mill go round and round. . . ."

This image of the apparently purposeless movements of the kite links up with the general theme of the incomprehensibility of life until we grasp it as a whole, in the light of experience—the theme which has already been met with in *Happiness*. But there is more to it than that. Varlamov, too, hovers about these parts, like a kite, and his ominous hovering is alien to the beauty and joyous, luxurious blossoming of the steppe.

The story is brimful of encounters, characters, snatches of conversation, incidents, which all amount to stupendous events, since everything is seen through the eyes of Yegorushka, which means it is all permeated with the strenuous joy of first discoveries. So many changes take place in the life and consciousness of the hero, and the sensation of Yegorushka's travels is so clearly maintained, we realize so vividly by the end of the story the changes and development wrought in him by this journey (how he has changed and matured, and is embarking on a new stage of life), that the image of the steppe gradually forming before our eyes, is the image of life itself. And this is the triumph of poetry. Yegorushka had left one part of his life behind him. And we feel how justifiable is the end of the tale, how thoroughly the author, by his ability to convey the sense of movement, is entitled to his conclusions. "Yegorushka felt that, with these people, all that had ever happened to him before had disappeared like smoke; exhausted, he dropped on to the bench and greeted the new, strange life, which was beginning for him, with a fit of bitter weeping....

"What sort of a life would it be?"

This is a highly characteristic ending for Chekhov. A certain part of life with all its thoughts and feelings is over, the person himself has become quite different, is entering upon a new life, and anxious anticipations of its unknown expanses, of new griefs and joys, rise within him. "What sort of a life would it be?" It is the

same atmosphere as that which colours the endings of *The Lady with the Dog, The Teacher of Literature* and *The Bride.*

The Steppe bears witness to the young writer's deep affection for his country, to his pure, whole-hearted, poetical perception of life, to his profound faith in a better future for his country.

As a young and now popular author Chekhov was beginning to attract the attention of the best of his countrymen. The gay "chest of drawers" on Sadovo-Kudrinskaya Street was honoured by a visit, as unexpected as it was joyful, from Chaikovsky, whose genius Chekhov worshipped. The composer sensed, in the music which was an inherent element in the young writer's work, something close to his own art, just as the painter Levitan, too, felt in Chekhov a kindred soul. Chaikovsky wanted Chekhov to write a libretto for him. Chekhov was to have written the libretto of Lermontov's *Bela.*

The association of the three great Russian artists—Chaikovsky, Levitan and Chekhov—is no mere chance. In the works of each the soul of the epoch was reflected, so calm, thoughtful and melancholy on the surface, but concealing and fostering within it storms and tempests.

Life seemed to smile upon Chekhov.

True, the critics pestered him, but publishers vied with one another for his favours. His occasional trips to Petersburg were personal triumphs; the most eminent people sought his acquaintance.

He was surrounded by admirers of both sexes: young actresses, artists, and simply charming, attractive girls and young women.

His youth had passed amidst want, care, exhausting toil. Now, it looked as if he had entered upon a period of maturity—youthful, vivid—a period of success and fame.

Anton Pavlovich struck people as a cheerful, carefree young man.

This is what V. G. Korolenko says of his acquaintance with the twenty-seven-year-old Chekhov:

"Before me stood a young man, who looked indeed younger than his years, a little above average height, with an oval face and regular, clear-cut features, still retaining the soft contours of youth. There was something unusual about the face, something which I was not able to define at first, and which my wife, who made Chekhov's acquaintance at the same time, expressed, as I think, rather happily. According to her, there was something in Chekhov's face, despite the fact that it was obviously the face of an intellectual, which suggested a simple-hearted country lad. And it was that which made his face so attractive. Even his eyes, blue, luminous and deep, gleamed at once with thought and with almost childish naïveté. His whole appearance, his gestures, his way and manner of speaking, like his writing, radiated simplicity. On the whole, at this my first meeting with him, Chekhov struck me as a profoundly cheerful soul. An endless source of the wit and spontaneous gaiety filling his stories seemed to well up in his eyes. But beneath it one sensed there was something deeper that had yet to develop and was bound to develop for the best. I got a general impression of sincerity and charm. . . ."

Marya Pavlovna, Chekhov's sister, remarks: "During the years 1888 and 1889 Anton Pavlovich was wonderfully high-spirited. He was always jolly, always working, joked incessantly; and could not get on without company."

And yet there was a cloud over the youthful writer's apparently serene existence.

From his early years Chekhov was accustomed to "suffer in silence." We do not mean to say that he feigned gaiety and cheerfulness. He felt that he was going through a stage of creative uplift.

But dark waves were surging in the depths of his heart, and the fits of melancholy, which Chekhov, as usual avoiding "sounding" and "pathetic" words, simply described as *boredom*, became more and more intolerable as time went on.

Chekhov's sister's remark that he could not do without company bears witness to something more than her brother's gregarious disposition. There was some deeper reason for this.

"I simply cannot live without company," Chekhov himself wrote. "Whenever I find myself alone, I am somehow frightened."

A somewhat striking confession when we think of the seemingly cheerful tenor of his life at that period.

Among the depressing visions which haunted him was the dark, dirty flight of stairs from which the writer Garshin had hurled himself.

"It is interesting that he knew, a week before his death, that he would throw himself from the stairs, and was preparing himself for this end. Appalling life! And the staircase in an awful one. I saw it—dark, filthy."

He had been deeply attached to Garshin, whose life was shattered against the stone walls of the prison which was Pobedonostsev's Russia. The frail image of the author of *The Crimson Flower*, which had taken a firm hold on Chekhov's imagination, reappeared in *The Fit*, and later, four years after Garshin's suicide, in the figure of Ivan Gromov (*Ward No. 6*). Hypersensitiveness to pain, suffering or humiliation; the vulnerability of a soul of childlike purity, a passionate abhorrence of lies and oppression, nervous susceptibility—all these "Garshin" traits, used already by Chekhov in the character of the student Vassilyev (*The Fit*), driven nearly to madness by the sight of human degradation, are characteristic also of the mentally unsound Gromov (*Ward No. 6*). When he fell ill, "it seemed to Ivan Dmitrich that all the violence of the

world had accumulated behind his back and was chasing him." The same vision haunted Garshin, driving him finally to suicide. The feeling was known to many who lived in the Russia of those days.

Chekhov was less vulnerable than Garshin and "people of the Garshin stamp," as he wrote of the chief character of *The Fit* in a letter to a friend. But this invulnerability of his had not come to him straight from heaven. He clad his soul in armour, training himself to be strong in order to be able to resist brutal reality and not succumb to despair. But it was because he possessed those very traits belonging to "people of the Garshin stamp," that he was able to understand them so well, and to reproduce their type with such subtlety. His own sensitiveness to falseness, suffering and oppression was just as acute and poignant as theirs.

Yes, the author of *The Steppe*, the poet of joy, found life intolerable.

And there were other things to torment him. The grim spectre of spiritual barrenness, of the "boredom" mentioned so frequently in his letters, became more and more persistent. This complex feeling, so unexpected in Chekhov, causing apathy, disinclination for writing, contempt for his own work, was perhaps the gravest of the dangers which threatened his talent. And this was the feeling which made him almost lose heart.

It was during those apparently happy years of recognition and fame that he was tortured by the question: what was he writing for? Was it something important that he was doing, or was he merely trifling? The oppressive sensation of futility sprang from his uncertainty whether his work was needed by anyone, was of any use.

"There are moments when I fairly lose heart," he admitted to Suvorin in December 1888. "Whom am I writing for, I wonder? For the public?"

By "the public" Chekhov understood the bourgeois reader and the middle-class, philistine intellectuals, whom he describes as "ignorant, ill-bred, the best of them unscrupulous and insincere in their attitude to us. I cannot make out whether this public needs me or not. Burenin* says it does not, and that what I do is nonsense. The Academy awarded me a prize—how is one to make head or tail of all this? Should I write for the sake of money? But I never have any money anyhow, and not being used to having any, am almost indifferent to it. I find I work half-heartedly when I write for money only. Is it for praise that I should write? But it only irritates me. Literary society, students, Yevreinova, Pleshcheyev, young girls, *etcetera*, have lauded me to the skies for *The Fit*, and yet Grigorovich was the only one to notice my description of the first snow-fall. And so on, and so on. If we had any real literary criticism I should at least know that I was providing material for it, whether bad or good, and that for people who devote themselves to the study of life I was as necessary as the stars are to astronomers. Then I would try and put my heart into my work, and would know what I was working for." As things then were, said Chekov, he, and all the writers of his generation, were like "maniacs writing books and plays for their own pleasure. Pleasure is a good thing, no doubt, but it only lasts while you are actually writing. And then what?"

Suvorin, who had no idea that this letter was one of the tragic documents of Russian literature, merely answered it by telling Chekhov "it was too early for him to begin complaining." The purport of his answer was that Chekhov had been spoilt by success and was "crying for the moon."

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* V. P. Burenin (1841-1926)—A critic of the reactionary *Novoye Vremya*.—*Ed.*

Chekhov was hurt by the suggestion that he had been complaining.

"It may be too early for me to complain," he writes in answer, "but one is never too young to ask oneself: has my work any weight, or is it mere trifling? The critics are silent, the public lies, and my instinct tells me I am trifling. Did I complain? I do not remember the tone of my letter, but if I did, it was not for my own sake, but for that of all writers, for whom I feel heartily sorry."

Such were the thoughts by which he was visited to the accompaniment of the music, the laughter and the merry voices filling the happy little "chest of drawers" on Sadovo-Kudrinskaya Street.

Doubts of the moral justification of his work as a writer, of its seriousness, came to him just as his fame was established.

With the maturing of his artistic skill, his sense of moral obligation grew still more acute, and the feeling that literature should be as necessary to life as bread, as air, grew ever stronger. Where this is not so, where the writer has no conviction that his work is a necessity for others, it is absurd for him to occupy himself with literature.

Russian literature has always provided an answer to the question: *what ought we to do*?

As soon as he realized that he possessed a talent capable of influencing the souls of his many readers, Chekhov, with his feeling that he was "one of those who are bound by a sense of duty and their own consciences," with his recognition of the terrifically responsible role of literature, felt the compulsion to give himself a definite answer to the question: where was he trying to lead his readers, and what was his aim?

The lack of a clear aim, of "the general idea," he regarded as a disease "worse than syphilis or impotence for artists. . . . All those writers we call great, or merely

good ... have one highly important feature in common: they are all striving to get somewhere, and inviting you to follow them, and you feel, not with your mind only, but with your whole being, that they have an aim of their own, like the ghost of Hamlet's father, which did not return and perturb people's minds for nothing.... The best of them are realistic, painting life as it is, but because every line they write is saturated with the consciousness of their aim, you feel that, in addition to life as it is, there is also life as it should be, and that is what charms you. And we? Oh, we! We merely describe life as it is, and then we get stuck.... You may lash us on with a whip, but we cannot budge. We have no aims, either immediate or distant, and our souls are a blank...."

Every line of this letter is saturated with the pain and passion of a Russian artist, with his feeling of obligation towards the people, with consciousness of his duty as a writer to point out a path to another, a just and pure existence.

It seemed to Chekhov that he merely described life as it is in his works. But of course he did not do himself justice, arraigning himself before the court of his own stern conscience. Surely we can feel in *The Steppe* the breath of the fresh wind of the heroic life which was one day to triumph in our country! And in all his stories the image of another, beautiful life, which is to be established in this world, is ever present.

But he felt that it was not enough merely to long for a beautiful future and depict the unbearable reality of his day. As a Russian writer he felt himself bound to give his reader a definite answer to the question: what ought we to do?

The writers of the sixties gave a direct answer to this question. Indeed, a famous Russian novel bore the title: *What Is To Be Done?*

Chekhov realized that a Russian writer was bound to give an answer to the question in the new phase his country was undergoing.

> *...For in the highest court you are alone:*
> *It is for you to judge what you have done.*
> *Stern artist, are you satisfied?*

Chekhov had a ready answer to the severe question put by Pushkin. He was himself the severest judge of his own work. And, stern artist that he was, he was not satisfied.

He sincerely thought his writing was merely "charming and talented," whereas his duty was to "brand the souls of men with the flaming word," to stimulate his readers to heroic deeds, to action. Thus the genius of Chekhov, not content to be merely a talent, gave him no rest.

He was deeply conscious of the fact that the old ideals were exploded, that "the accursed problems" demanded fresh solutions. But the solutions proposed by the various ideologists of his time in the columns of contemporary papers and magazines, seemed to him as irrelevant as the whole of literary criticism.

It would seem that he ought to have lent an attentive ear to the utterances of Mikhailovsky, the leader of liberal Narodism at that time, who accused Chekhov—and that in connection with *The Steppe*—of the very thing Chekhov accused himself of. It was Mikhailovsky's constant reproach that Chekhov lacked a definite outlook, that there was no aim in his writing.

But these reproaches did not seem to worry Chekhov much. He felt that they concealed a desire to force him to profess paltry ideals, the meagreness of which he held in derision. He felt the falseness of the attempt of the lead-

ers of Narodism of the eighties to pose as the torch-bearers of their fathers' ideals, the guardians of the traditions of the sixties.

"The sixties," Chekhov wrote to Pleshcheyev in 1888, "was a sacred era, and to allow it to be usurped by a set of brainless dormice is to vulgarize it."

By "brainless dormice" Chekhov alluded to the representatives of petty liberalism, liberalism in all its multifarious aspects, including that of the Narodniks.

He clearly realized how alien to his spirit were the tendencies which ruffled the surface of the age.

"I am neither a liberal, nor a conservative, nor am I an advocate of gradual progress, a monk, or an indifferentist," he wrote to Pleshcheyev in 1888, and this was correct self-appraisal. In his creative work he towered above all the legally recognized political groups of his time. They all seemed petty and insignificant to him. "Where is your socialism?" he asked in a letter, and there was bitter irony in the answer he gave himself: "You'll find it in Tikhomirov's letter to the tsar." Lev Tikhomirov was a well-known renegade, one of the chameleons who deserted and renounced the Narodnaya Volya (People's Will) after it had been suppressed, and wrote an apologetic letter to the tsar. Chekhov had not heard of any socialism but that professed by the adherents of Narodism.

Lenin wrote that the last word of the Russian revolutionaries was the action of March 1. By that time the working class did not organize any broad social movement or create any strong organization, and as for the liberal bourgeoisie it was so immature politically that after the assassination of Alexander II it resorted only to petitions.

Chekhov's longing for real literary criticism was at the same time longing for social and moral ideals capable of inspiring literature, in the way that the criticism of

Belinsky, Chernyshevsky and Dobrolyubov had inspired literature in their time.

He grew more and more dissatisfied with his own work. In May 1889 he wrote: "During the last two years I have stopped caring to see my stories in print, I have grown indifferent to reviews, to literary talk.... I feel a kind of stagnation in my heart.... It is not that I am disappointed, or weary, or depressed, it is just that I don't seem to care about things the way I used to."

In another letter he says: "I don't like my writings being so popular." And somewhere else he confessed he felt he was "deceiving" the reader.

Why write, he kept asking himself, if you cannot find an answer to the most important questions?

In a letter written in November 1888 he said: "The life of a conscious being who lacks a conception of the world is not life, but a burden—it is appalling."

We know how Chekhov disliked sounding phrases, especially when it was a question of his personal feelings. And his choice of the word "appalling" shows how strong his feelings must have been.

All ethical problems, everything connected with the most intimate side of human relationships, merged, in Chekhov's mind, with the problem of the individual's outlook on life.

The Lights, one of the stories he wrote in 1888, is a perfect illustration of the fact that a false outlook may find a sinister reflection in the sphere of personal relations. In this connection *The Lights* may be compared with *The Grasshopper*: the false ideas of the heroine of *The Grasshopper* about "the élite," and "little", "ordinary" mortals served her as a justification for the ugly, trivial life upon which she embarked after her unfaithfulness, thus leading to the destruction of a wonderful man who was truly great. In *The Lights* Chekhov makes a direct protest against the reactionary pessimistic ideas

which were then very much in vogue among a great section of the intellectuals. These ideas as to the vanity of all things earthly, the emptiness and aimlessness of life, had their source in the reactionary doctrines then prevailing in Western Europe, and were connected with the name of Schopenhauer. By means of this philosophy it was possible to justify renegacy and any baseness, both in public and private life.

One of the principal characters of the story, the engineer Ananyev, describes this decadent school of thought as follows:

"It was just beginning to come into fashion with the public towards the end of the seventies, and later, in the beginning of the eighties, gradually filtered through into literature, science and politics. I was only twenty-six at the time, but I was perfectly aware that there was neither purpose nor meaning in life, that all was deception and illusion, that essentially there was no difference between the life of the convicts on the Island of Sakhalin and that of the inhabitants of Nice ... that there was neither right nor wrong, that all was stuff and nonsense, and to hell with it!"

The engineer Ananyev, a mature, thoughtful man, had learned by bitter experience how callous were these ideas which had so fascinated him in his youth. He strives to convince the student von Stenberg that the latter's decadent views are utterly pernicious. By way of illustration he relates him an episode of his own youth which resulted in his abjuring, with shame and horror, the decadent philosophy which had once seemed so seductive to him. This philosophy, he insists, led him to a "crime tantamount to murder."

He had once gone from the capital, where he had just graduated from some higher educational institution, to spend a few days in the town where he had grown up and gone to school. Here he met a young woman he had known

when she was still a schoolgirl; everyone called her "Kitten" in those days, and he had been "head over ears in love with her." Kitten had lost none of her charm and freshness. But she was very unhappy. Like many other good young girls of that day, her dreams of a life which should be rational and pure had ended in her marrying a coarse worthless man in the little provincial town, and life had become a burden to her, she felt as if she lived "in a ditch." She is overjoyed to meet somebody from the capital, a student, a friend of her early youth. He stands for everything that is pure, honest, progressive. She regards him with a naive adoration, not so much of him personally, as of the purity and idealism of her girlish dreams, now so distant.

But he was thinking of something quite different. Since there is "no right and wrong in this world," since all is "vanity of vanities," since there is no meaning in life, and everything living is doomed to die, and so on, and so forth, he thinks nothing, in the heat of passion, of promising Kitten to take her "to the end of the world" with him. For her, their meeting and the intimacy which soon followed is real love, a revolution in her life, a bold step—she was ready to break with her husband—the beginning of a new life.

Ananyev, however, after seducing Kitten, sneaks back to the station to leave the town. But when he finds himself in the railway carriage at night, "alone with his conscience," the image of the confiding woman he had betrayed rose before his mind's eye, and he felt like a murderer. In order to stifle the pangs of conscience he tried to resort to his usual "salutary" philosophy as to the transitoriness of all things living. But this time it "did not help"; on the contrary, for the first time he saw it for the monstrous thing it was. For the first time in his life he realized its abnormality. "My normal way of thinking began, it now seems to me, the moment I decided to go back

to the A B C of ethics, that is to say, when my conscience made me return to the town of N., where I simply confessed all to Kitten, imploring her forgiveness, like a little boy, and mingling my tears with hers. . . ."

Ananyev's story did not convince the student Stenberg. At the very start of the argument, Stenberg had said to Ananyev: "What we think cannot affect anyone for good or ill." It was this remark that led Ananyev to tell his story.

What we think *does* affect others. It had been terrible for Kitten to discover that the man whom she had thought of as pure and idealistic was capable of lying. If she had felt she was living "in a ditch" before she met Ananyev, what must her life have been after their encounter and his desertion of her?

The purport of the story is to convince the reader that thoughts, ideas, outlook are of decisive importance, that a false outlook may lead to "crime tantamount to murder."

Once more we are reminded of the feeling which possessed Chekhov—his consciousness of the terrible responsibility he had undertaken for the thoughts and ideas underlying his work.

As a doctor himself, Chekhov, like his own Dr. Astrov in *Uncle Vanya,* suffered deeply every time the disease of a patient of his took a turn for the worse, feeling that he had been to blame even when, as people say, medicine is helpless. As an author he trembled over every word he wrote, lest it should prove in the slightest degree injurious to some human life.

In both cases—in medicine and in literature—this was due to his feeling of responsibility towards human life.

And that is why his longing for a clear, definite outlook became so acute, so tense.

In the same year (1888), in which he wrote *The Lights*, Chekhov got the idea of a story to illustrate a theme

which gave him no peace—that "the life of a conscious being who lacks a conception of the world is not life, but a burden—it is appalling." He wished to describe "a healthy susceptible young man, capable of appreciating both wine and the beauty of nature, fond of philosophizing, neither a bookworm nor a disappointed man—in fact, an ordinary young man. The hero of the story, "thanks to his position as a citizen, a lover, a husband, a thinking man ... stumbles upon problems which, whether he wants to or not, he must solve. But how is he to solve them, when he has no definite outlook? How?"

A pathetic note rings in the question, in the reiteration of the word "How?" which points to the profoundly personal significance of the question to Chekhov.

Of course he was wrong in thinking he had "no definite outlook." *The Lights* alone proves that Chekhov had entered the lists against the reactionary, decadent ideas characteristic of the age.

And is it not clear that in its essence everything Chekhov wrote in the eighties, not to mention the nineties, is marked by a progressive outlook?

But Chekhov's predecessors, the writers of the sixties, had actively and directly participated in the political struggle of their time. Their age advanced great political ideals, and contemporary writers had, for good or ill, to define their attitude to them, whether they were inspired by those ideals or opposed to them.

The eighties, so it seemed to Chekhov, had advanced no great political ideals. He considered it an age of political apathy.

More and more frequent expressions of bitterness and indignation over the fact that the writers of his generation are deprived of participation in political life, crop up in his letters. Such a state of things seemed abnormal, monstrous to him. This longing for political life of his shows that he was outgrowing his political indifference.

But the political life which could be seen on the surface caused him nothing but boredom. The various political groups seemed to him "ignorant." And his knowledge and understanding of Russian life were certainly infinitely deeper and more thorough than those displayed by the liberal critics and journalists.

Thus, while up to the end of the eighties Chekhov was still an outsider in politics, his indifference was no longer due to a lack of interest in politics, but to his realization of the futility of the political groups he knew, which were incapable of bringing about the slightest change in life. Chekhov saw in political indifference freedom from all the "parties" of the day, whether reactionary, liberal, or liberal-popular. But the real tragedy of Chekhov's position lay in the fact that his indifference prevented him from guessing that another form of political life *did* exist, was taking shape and maturing, and making the uprooting of the entire social system its aim. His indifference led Chekhov to contribute to Suvorin's reactionary *Novoye Vremya.* So vain and petty did the political life of his age seem to him that he did not think it mattered in what paper or magazine he published his works.

Later he understood how erroneous this position was, and drew his own conclusions. But this was not till the nineties. In the eighties it seemed to him that the generation to which he belonged was doomed to take no part in political life, and hence to sterility.

He was too intuitive not to see the historical inevitability of the disease from which his generation was suffering. "This disease, it must be presumed, has its good side, and was not sent to us for nothing. . . ."

The idea that the present sufferings of their contemporaries "would turn to joy for those who come after us," as Olga says in the concluding act of *The Three Sisters,* was ever present in the mind of Chekhov and in the minds of the fictional characters he created.

But he could not be content with this, he could not content himself with surmises about the historical inevitability of his sufferings. If a writer does not give an answer to radical questions, does not lead the reader to a certain goal, does not point out the way to attain this goal, if he lacks a definite social ideal, he has no business to appear before the reader. That was the conclusion reached by Chekhov on the threshold of the nineties. And that was the beginning of the end of his political indifference.

Passion and tenacity in the quest for ideals, so typical of Chekhov, was one of the most remarkable features of the "undercurrent," invisible to the naked eye, but nonetheless existing in the eighties. For that very age, famous as "the epoch of social stagnation," is firmly established in the history of the country as an epoch which saw the development of a new outlook. The old ideals were defunct, and new ones were being born amidst suffering and struggle. The end of the old ideals could be seen, the development of the new ones was still hidden in the depths of history.

This is how Saltykov-Shchedrin writes about the eighties:

"It is clear that some significant subterranean work is going on, that new springs are trying to come to the surface, seething and bubbling in the evident determination to come to light. The hum of the traditional routine of life is being persistently drowned by these subterranean rumblings; the hard times have not yet come, but everyone now realizes their imminence."

By "hard times," the sage revolutionary-democratic writer was referring, of course, to the revolution.

Chekhov's passionate endeavours to provide in his writings an answer to the question: "What ought we to do?" that should chime with the new era may be traced to all that is best and most progressive in the national tradi-

tions of Russian literature, and to the intimate ties linking Chekhov with the age in which he lived and the fundamental requirements of the era.

A great artist may always be known by his identification with the sufferings and joys of the age in which he lives. The quest of genius is always the quest of his own era.

Chekhov's doubts and sufferings reflected the transitory nature of his epoch, eagerly seeking for new ideals and abjuring the old ones. Chekhov was acutely alive to the historical obsolescence of the old ideals and the necessity of finding new ones.

The dissatisfaction with himself and his work, which took such a powerful hold on Chekhov towards the end of the eighties, had therefore profound, hidden historical and social roots. This dissatisfaction shows that Chekhov possessed what we may call the historical instinct, social intuition. His anxiety mirrored the anxiety of the era itself, an era of passionate search, of transition and crisis.

The belief that Chekhov had no social outlook, that he never even wished to have one, that he was opposed to the introduction of any ideals whatever into art, is based on Chekhov's own frequent strictures on "tendencies" in literature. These strictures, as a matter of fact, crop up with particular frequency towards the end of the eighties, during those very years when, as we have seen, Chekhov's longing for a definite outlook, a "ruling principle" had become particularly acute.

In order to explain this apparent contradiction, we have only to remind ourselves what exactly were the "tendencies" criticized by Chekhov. They were either liberal, liberal-Narodnik, or reactionary "tendencies": everything that went to trim and misrepresent reality so as to make it fit this or that scheme and dogma. The insignificance of "popular" or liberal ideals provoked Chekhov's sar-

casm even in the eighties: those who professed these ideals were "dormice" in his eyes. The young Chekhov wrote a contemptuous pamphlet on the sour-sweet liberal intellectual. In *Neighbours*, Chekhov exposes a typical "dormouse" of the popular movement, with his stale, flat ideas about home industries and the other pillars of Narodism. The writer did not know what to set up against the threadbareness of liberalism and Narodism, but he was thoroughly aware of this threadbareness, even while the limitations of liberalism could not fail to influence his own ideas, seeing that he remained isolated from the revolutionary struggle. The memoirs of his contemporaries clearly show that despite Chekhov's warnings against tendencies in literature, he himself could not avoid reflecting liberal and Narodnik tendencies.

A. S. Lazarev-Gruzinsky writes:

"Among Chekhov's precepts for writers during the eighties, the admonition against tendencies was the most frequent. Chekhov was a fervent enemy to tendentiousness in those years, and reverted to the subject with a kind of passionate persistence.

"... In a letter addressed to Shcheglov, if I am not mistaken, Chekhov let slip the strange admission that he could not explain why he liked Shakespeare and detested Zlatovratsky (a writer of the Narodnik school)....

"...What was it, after all, that caused Chekhov to revert to the idea of tendentiousness so persistently? It seems to me it was his reaction as a writer to the reproaches of 'indifference,' 'apathy' and 'lack of principle' showered upon him by Mikhailovsky, Skabichevsky and other critical experts."

It was the tendencies of such liberal-Narodnik writers as Zlatovratsky, Mikhailovsky and Skabichevsky which were rejected by Chekhov, with his instinct for life, his intuitive understanding of the impracticability, backwardness and pettiness of their ideas, and his consciousness

of the need for immeasurably broader platforms and ideals for his native land.

We have already mentioned that the stand taken up by Chekhov in the eighties, his "freedom from all parties," had its good side and its bad side. But for this freedom he might not have written either *Neighbours* or *The House with the Mansard*, stories in which he exposes the narrowness and pettiness of Zemstvo liberalism, setting up in opposition the dream of breaking "the heavy chain" with which the Russian peasant was fettered; nor would he have written *The Muzhiks, In the Gully* or *The New Country-house*, a classical series of stories of peasant life in which he ruthlessly tears down the web of honeyed lies about the Russian village spun by the Narodnik writers. These stories were greeted enthusiastically by the Marxist critics of the day.

But as has already been said there was a bad and dangerous side to this "freedom," as well. While insisting on his independence of "the parties of the moment," Chekhov at the same time took up the position of aloofness from parties, so to speak on principle, an indifference to "all parties" and to their politics. While suffering from the lack of political life, of a definite outlook, which should include a political programme, he at the same time blocked the way to the acquirement of such an outlook. Any "trend," any definite political platform seemed to him tendentious, an encroachment on his spiritual independence, his right and duty to portray life as it is, honestly, broadly and truthfully, unshackled by subjective schemes and doctrines. And this was one of the reasons why Chekhov, to the end of his life, never got acquainted with that which represented the true political and spiritual life of the country during the nineties, and still more during the first decade of our century: the growth of the workers' revolutionary movement, and Marxist theory.

The very painfulness of his quest, his heartsickness, melancholy and sense of hollowness were enhanced by the fact that he was so remote from the new, progressive, scientific outlook then in process of formation—Marxism. And all the while it was precisely for a scientific, finished, harmonious outlook, a programme for action based on scientific thought that he was longing! His search often seemed hopeless to him. This feeling is reflected in some of his works, in which the mood of despondency and doubt prevails. Notwithstanding the progressive, revolutionary significance of *Ward No. 6*, with its strong, undeniable note of protest, do not we sense a certain heartsickness and despondency in it?

Chekhov's indifference to politics led to a narrowing of the writer's field of vision, to an incompleteness of the picture of Russian life as it appeared in his writings, to the lack of Russian characters who should be purposeful, strong, iron-willed, capable of struggle, never yielding to mere dejection, characters of whom Chekhov himself dreamed all his life, whom he searched for with such longing in his passionate desire for happiness, justice and freedom for his country!

It was this "freedom from parties and politics," this falsely understood independence which made it possible for Chekhov, over a long period, to work for *Novoye Vremya* and keep up a friendship with Suvorin. It could not fail to leave its mark on him, increasing his political scepticism, his "boredom."

LOVING FOE

At a time when Chekhov was racked by doubts regarding what was most important of all for him—his work as an author—he was lapped in the embraces of a loving foe —Suvorin.

Chekhov's acquaintance with Suvorin and his becoming a contributor to *Novoye Vremya* date back to an earlier period. The personal intimacy begins with this period.

Editor of a great newspaper, an able journalist, novelist and playwright, "a cunning courtier," adapting his paper and his pen to the requirements of the ruling clique, Suvorin was a man who led a dual life. In the "a-political" eighties the most liberal people believed it possible to separate the writer from his politics, and in his contacts with literary circles Suvorin knew how to present himself first and foremost as a man of letters. His plays were popular, and critics of the liberal press completely ignored the political views of the author.

He made quite a good start in life in the sixties. Grandson of a serf and son of a peasant, he began his career as a teacher of geography in a district school in the town of Bobrov, getting an even lower salary than the teacher Medvedenko in Chekhov's *The Sea-gull*; the latter received 23 rubles a month, Suvorin only 14 rubles 67 kopeks. After he had had a few stories and sketches accepted, he left Bobrov and went to live in a hut some eight or nine miles away from Moscow, with his wife. He began con-

tributing to *Sovremennik*, and Chernyshevsky himself received him. His works were prohibited by the censor, and he was called to account for them. He wrote booklets at the order of Lev Tolstoi for the Yasnaya Polyana peasants, and Tolstoi himself paid for them.

This was a fine start, betrayed and dishonoured by Suvorin in a later period of his life.

For a long time he was regarded as an honest liberal writer; his light articles, signed "Stranger," enjoyed a certain popularity.

Suvorin's *Novoye Vremya* became ever more influential with the years, and he amassed a huge fortune on the money contributed by domestic servants—his paper published advertisements of "employment wanted" by cooks, housemaids and nurses. Having become a rich, influential editor, fondled by tsarist officials, who sensed his instability, Suvorin began to change his course, to adapt himself to circumstances, in the words of Shchedrin, "to steer by the winds of baseness." The victory of the reaction finally convinced him that it was no good expecting any social upheavals and changes. *Novoye Vremya* gradually became a paper which earned the devastating sobriquet invented by Saltykov-Shchedrin: "What Can I Do for You?"

While serving reaction, Suvorin, himself a member of the middle class who had risen from the masses, and a man of great intelligence, thoroughly understood the baseness, filth and treacherousness of the camp in which he now found himself. Proof of this may be found in his famous diary, published in 1923. Here, alone with himself, Suvorin poured out his contempt for the ruling camp, described its leaders in the most opprobrious terms, admitted the corruption and rottenness of that which he served.

Of course this only heightens his guilt. His mind was a quagmire, made up of all sorts of components. Here were

the ability to feign remorse, and even the ability to produce sincere lies. Chekhov said: "Lying is the same as drunkenness—a liar will lie with his dying breath." Ironically enough he wrote this in a letter to Suvorin.

Lenin gave an exhaustive summary of Suvorin's character in an article briefly and expressively entitled "Career."

"The lately deceased millionaire editor of *Novoye Vremya*, A. S. Suvorin, illustrated and reflected in the history of his life an extremely interesting period in the history of the whole of Russian bourgeois society.

"Poor man, liberal, even democratic at the outset of his career—millionaire, complacent and shameless praiser of the bourgeoisie, grovelling before every turn in the policy of the powers that be towards the end of that path. Is not this typical of the mass of 'educated' and 'intelligent' representatives of so-called society? Not all, of course, play the renegade with such frantic success as to become millionaires, but nine out of ten, if not ninety-nine out of a hundred, play precisely the same renegade game, beginning as radical students and ending up in 'snug jobs' in some government office, or business firm."

Suvorin was an adept at the sincere lie. The time came when Chekhov understood this. Later he wrote to his younger brother Mikhail, strongly advising him not to work for *Novoye Vremya*: "Of course I would infinitely prefer work in a printing office, if I were you, and would reject the newspaper. *Novoye Vremya* has a very bad reputation at present, only prosperous and self-satisfied people work for it (not counting Alexander, who sees nothing). Suvorin is false, terribly false, especially at so-called moments of frankness, that is to say, he may be sincere in what he says, but there is no guarantee that he will not act exactly the opposite in half an hour."

This clear understanding of the essence of Suvorin was not soon attained by Anton Pavlovich. In the eighties

Suvorin captured the affections of the young writer. Suvorin knew how to show the side of him that had once been associated with the honest and progressive. He knew how to make it seem as if Suvorin was one thing, and the contributors to *Novoye Vremya* were something quite different, and that he inwardly despised the filthy set. And this was not so far from the truth, either—he really did despise statesmen. Suvorin managed to create in the mind of the young Chekhov a lasting impression that while he, Suvorin, was devoted to his paper, he was by no means completely responsible for it, and that, but for the *Novoye Vremya* staff, he would never have admitted so much that was indecent and disgraceful in his paper. He posed as a man absorbed in his own writing, in the theatre he had created. One of Chekhov's biographers was right in stating that "when Chekhov began contributing to *Novoye Vremya* he sincerely believed that Suvorin must be rescued from ... the *Novoye Vremya.*"

It was precisely as an author that Suvorin managed to get a hold on Chekhov. The young Chekhov was attracted by Suvorin's "independent" mind, his brilliant conversation, his audacity and outspokenness, and by his whimsical way of expressing himself.

We know that independence was one of the main items in Chekhov's code of living. In the displeasure of the liberal and Narodnik camp with his working for *Novoye Vremya* he saw an attempt at his independence. Now Suvorin demanded nothing of him, set him no conditions, did not curtail his rights to publish anywhere he liked. Suvorin played subtly on this heightened feeling for independence of his, laughed at the "narrow party spirit" of the liberal papers, the "bookishness" of the liberal leaders, their dogmatism, even their cowardice, their tendency to compromise with the reaction. And it seemed to the young Chekhov that it really did not matter in the least where one's work appeared—the great thing was that the stories

should be honest, that they should serve progress, and not reaction ("I have believed in progress since my childhood," he said to Suvorin in a letter). And if honest stories come out in a reactionary paper, all the worse for the paper! He contributed to Suvorin's paper, bearing aloft his banner of independence from everything, including *Novoye Vremya.*

"They've got *Novoye Vremya* on the brain!" said Chekhov to Lazarev-Gruzinsky, in his annoyance with those who expressed dissatisfaction at his contribution to Suvorin's paper. "Don't you see it's a mere matter of arithmetic? A paper has fifty thousand readers—I'm not speaking of *Novoye Vremya*, but of any paper—it's a great deal better that these fifty, forty, or thirty thousand readers should read five hundred of my harmless lines than those five hundred harmful lines which they would otherwise have to read if I didn't contribute my own. Why, it's as clear as daylight! And so I mean to write in whatever paper chooses to invite me."

The story goes that during Chekhov's period of contributing to Suvorin's paper a kind of spiritual intimacy existed between him and Suvorin, if only for a short time. Naturally, intimacy with Suvorin could not be without some effect on Chekhov's ideological development. Suvorin undoubtedly did retard this development, intensifying in Chekhov his political scepticism, endeavouring to inculcate reactionary views in him. But in this last Suvorin did not succeed.

Their relations were of a somewhat peculiar nature. When it was a question of the appraisal of individual manifestations of art, individual and more or less "neutral" aspects of everyday life, they were frequently in agreement, and Chekhov derived pleasure from talk and correspondence with Suvorin. Once, however, he frankly admitted in a letter to Suvorin that the desire he felt for correspondence and conversation with him "does not

mean that you are the best of all my friends, but simply that I'm fond of you...." As soon as it appeared that a given phenomenon could not be evaluated without touching upon questions of principle, upon a fundamental attitude to life, it came out that the relations between Suvorin and Chekhov were in reality those of people occupying ideological standpoints which were poles apart. Chekhov gradually freed himself from Suvorin's influence.

The essence of these relations consisted in incessant argument, usually expressed in the most courteous form.

Suvorin refrained as a rule from direct, open opposition to Chekhov. Taught by experience, he endeavoured, unnoticed by the young writer, to inoculate him with the germ of his own inner emptiness of spirit, his hostility to all that was progressive and advanced.

The following incident throws a light on the relations between Chekhov and Suvorin.

On the pretext that the matter was a question of "pure art," Suvorin, in a letter to Chekhov, praises *Le Disciple*, a novel by the French writer Paul Bourget. The cunning fellow was putting out feelers. He passed over in silence the fact that the novel was an attack on progressive science, atheism and materialism.

But Chekhov was not one to go in for discussion on the basis of "pure art." Acquainting himself with the contents of the novel, he paid due tribute to its entertaining qualities and wit. But he joined issue with Bourget and Suvorin on the main point. He stood up for materialism against idealism, atheism against religion. He took the bull by the horns and in no uncertain terms exposed the book's "main defect." "This is a pretentious campaign against the materialistic trend. Excuse me, but I do not understand such campaigns.... To forbid people to adopt a materialist outlook is equivalent to forbidding the search for truth. Outside of matter there is neither experience nor knowledge, and, consequently, no truth." Chekhov

holds up to ridicule the libellous clerical implication in the book that atheism and materialism lead to depravity. "As far as depravity goes, it is not the followers of Mendeleyev who are renowned as the most refined voluptuaries and drunkards, but—the prelates and other persons who make a point of attending the chapels of embassies regularly."

The campaign against materialist philosophy and atheism was the main characteristic of those days. Chekhov's disputes with Suvorin were disputes with all the reactionaries of the epoch.

The disagreements between Chekhov and Suvorin became particularly acute in the early nineties, after Chekhov's journey to Sakhalin, which, as we shall see, played a great role in the formation of his outlook and in his creative work. Chekhov broke off relations with *Novoye Vremya* in 1893, never again contributing a line to the paper. The year before, in 1892, a most interesting argument had sprung up between himself and Suvorin on a subject of vital importance to Chekhov.

Suvorin sent an equivocal reply to the letter quoted in the previous chapter, in which Chekhov speaks of the necessity for the writer of great and inspiring aims. He said he had shown Chekhov's letter to a certain lady. This lady was horrified by the "gloominess," the "pessimism" of the letter, which had such a "desolating" impression on her that she had in her turn written a letter to Suvorin. Her extremely "beautiful" and "lofty" missive amounted to the somewhat banal idea that life in itself is good, and that no aims are required. "The aim of life," wrote the lady, "is life itself. I believe in life, in its bright moments, for the sake of which we not only can, but must live. I believe in man, in the good side of his nature." Suvorin declared himself in complete agreement with the utterances of the optimistic lady.

Chekhov's reply is of interest.

"Do you mean to say all that is sincere, that it means something? It's not a point of view, it's lollipops. . . . Under the influence of her letter you write to me of 'life for life's sake.' I thank you humbly. Her optimistic letter is a thousand times more like the tomb than mine. I write that there are no aims, and you understand that I consider these aims essential, and am ready to go in search of them, but S. writes that we ought not to lure mankind with all sorts of blessings they can never attain . . . 'appreciate what *is*,' for according to her all our misfortunes are due to our seeking certain lofty and remote aims. Anyone who really thinks that human beings no more need lofty, remote aims than cows do, that "all our misfortunes" spring from such aims, has nothing left to do but eat, drink, sleep, or, when this becomes a bore, take a running leap and bang his forehead against the corner of a chest."

Once again the argument touched upon the vital centre of the whole social-political life of the day, upon all the questions of the age. In the eighties the formula "life for life's sake" meant the renegade throwing up of the struggle against outrageous reality, the desecration of the sacred period of the sixties, when great aims and ideals were advanced. "Life for life's sake," the rejection of "impossible blessings," meant the justification of the theory of "little deeds," so widespread among the intellectuals of the day, the theory of commonplace resignation to intolerable life. "The rehabilitation of reality" was violently advocated at that time in liberal-bourgeois intellectuals' circles, too (the liberal *Nedelya* advanced these ideas with particular zeal).

When Chekhov said "there is no aim," Suvorin caught at the words, with which he was in complete agreement. Why of course! he rejoiced. There is no aim! It almost looked as if the debaters were in full agreement. But Suvorin made a slight addition: There is none, and—none is

needed. And it was this addition which Chekhov pounced upon, instantly exposing the unreality of his apparent "agreement" with Suvorin, the abyss which separated them. Chekhov was tortured by the thought that the age, as it seemed to him, was advancing no great social ideals; he sought great aims, because he was unable to reconcile himself to life as it was, to "life for life's sake." But Suvorin appreciated what *was*. Harshly, in short angry phrases, Chekhov removed the layer of "the beautiful," the "poetic" from the formula "life for life's sake," exposed its egoistical, reactionary, stale, lifeless essence.

Suvorin was so anxious for Chekhov to go over to the "life for life's sake" standpoint that he actually, in his reviews, made the author out to be an advocate of this slogan.

"His outlook is quite different," wrote Suvorin of Chekhov. "It is a firmly established, humane outlook, devoid of sentimentality, independent of all trends, be the colours tinging them bright or pale. There is nothing that has been poisoned by prejudice in this talented man.... He seems to be trying to say that we must live simply, like everyone else, and put one's best intentions into the development of this simple, ordinary life, not wasting them on exaggerated feats, not vaguely aspiring to set the ocean on fire."

The old courtier was cunning, well versed in the art of subtle flattery, and he played this game with Chekhov with the utmost subtlety. How deftly he wove together truth and lies in his review!

And how cunningly he exploited the aspirations of Anton Pavlovich for spiritual independence, which meant for Chekhov, first and foremost, independence from middle-class vulgarity! With a skilfully concealed twist Suvorin transforms the aspiration towards this sort of independence into middle-class yearnings for "independence" from ideas and ideals.

Suvorin makes of Chekhov, with his distaste for commonplace reconciliation to the vulgarity of life, an average man, "appreciating what *is*" and teaching his readers to "live like everyone else."

Anton Pavlovich by no means invariably succeeded in separating the truth from the lies in the Suvorin web. But he was sufficiently determined about what was most important, what was decisive for him, and opposed the Suvorin principles with characteristic firmness, his undeviating strivings for truth, his conscience, and his good sense as a Russian democratic middle-class intellectual.

Even at the time when his liking for Suvorin was at its height, Chekhov never forgave either him or his paper for that which he considered morally indefensible, dishonest, unjust. In March 1889, for instance, he wrote to Suvorin: "Not long ago *Novoye Vremya* printed an extract from some paper which had joined in the chorus of praise in the press of German housemaids who work all day like navvies and get only two or three rubles a month. *Novoye Vremya* subscribed to this praise, and added on its own account that it is our misfortune that we keep too many servants.... In my opinion the Germans are scoundrels.... In the first place, it's revolting to talk about servants as if they were convicts; in the second place, servants are equal members of society, and are made of exactly the same flesh and blood as Bismarck...."

By calling the Germans who exploited the labour of housemaids "scoundrels," Chekhov tacitly accused *Novoye Vremya*, too, of baseness for joining in the "chorus of praise."

Suvorin was forced to take affronts like this from Chekhov in silence. "He's still young and green," the wily old fox must often have told himself. He could always put things so as to make out that not he, but his staff were to blame for this or that baseness in the paper—he was occupied with literature, the paper went "of itself."

While praising Chekhov's writings himself, he at the same time permitted his contributors to decry Chekhov in the columns of *Novoye Vremya.* Thus he emphasized the theory that Suvorin was one thing and *Novoye Vremya* quite another; and this in itself emphasized the theory of Suvorin's "spiritual independence," his "breadth of views", his "toleration" of all opinions (the whole bag of tricks usually employed by any bourgeois press). Old fox that he was, Suvorin knew very well that Chekhov would never break off relations with him on the grounds of personal injury.

The study of Chekhov's letters to Suvorin brings us to a dual state of mind—we rejoice that Chekhov managed to escape the toils laid for him by the cunning, loving foe, and we grieve over his political naïveté. We experience this dual emotion when reading, to give an example, Anton Pavlovich's advice to his brother Alexander to put up a determined resistance to Suvorin whenever there was a chance, and to take an independent stand among the contributors to *Novoye Vremya.* Chekhov was still full of hopes of "ennobling" Suvorin's paper in those days.

It was after he had written *The Fit* (November 11, 1888) that Anton Pavlovich asked Suvorin: "Why is there never anything about prostitution in your paper? It is a most terrible evil, you know. Our Sobolev Street is a slave-market."

Chekhov had not yet realized that *Novoye Vremya* purposely passed over appalling social ulcers in silence.

Chekhov wrote truly to Suvorin that he knew he was "sometimes naive" in his letters to him. Some time was needed before he could shake off this naïveté in his relations with Suvorin.

Suvorin was apparently well equipped to exercise a profound influence over Chekhov. He had an ironical turn of mind, acuteness, common sense, a businesslike appraisal of art, great practical scope. Suvorin stretched out a

hand to Chekhov when the latter was still a contributor to *Oskolki* and when his literary circle was confined to Leikin and the small fry of journalism.

But the most important factor in the profound influence of Suvorin on Chekhov was the spectre of vacuity haunting Chekhov, his dissatisfaction with himself as a writer, his belief that he was busying himself over "trifles," the difficulty and, as it sometimes seemed to him, the hopelessness of discovering clear aims and ideals in an age of social stagnation. All this, together with Chekhov's tendency to irony, might have led to a philosophy of utter scepticism, to a sneering attitude to everything. And then the Suvorin abyss would have been ready to swallow him up.

Suvorin challenged him to give up, with calm scepticism, the search for the "impossible." He played on the sober turn of Chekhov's mind. Wasn't it obvious that all search was fruitless, that "there was no aim," and never could be any? Wasn't all this Don Quixote stuff ridiculous?

Yes, the Suvorin danger in the life of Chekhov was a grave one, fraught with the poisons of the age.

But Chekhov shook off this danger, too. Both the Leikin and the Suvorin bogey remained far below, and the genius of Chekhov rose higher and higher.

DEATH OF A BROTHER

The Chekhov family spent the summer of 1889 in the Ukraine, where they rented a cottage on the Luka homestead, a picturesque spot on the bank of the River Psyol, not far from the town of Sumy. It promised to be a glorious summer. Chekhov was delighted with the Ukrainian landscape and the poetical nature of the Ukrainian people; he found in the very appearance of the Ukrainians much that was akin to himself, and was fond of describing himself, a southerner, as a "khokhol" (Ukrainian). Though, like the artist Levitan, he was the poet of nature in Central Russia, which, as Trigorin in *The Sea-gull* said, aroused in him the passionate, overmastering desire to write, he could not but feel the charms of Ukrainian scenery. Moreover he had the prospect of indulging to the top of his bent in his favourite pastime, angling.

But everything was darkened by the expectation of Nikolai's death. The decanter of vodka, which had not been broken, played its fatal role. His family carried the sick artist to the homestead of Luka. As a doctor, Anton Pavlovich knew that his brother was doomed to die, and that soon. With the courage of a sober diagnostician, he faced the truth, as he always did. To a letter from Alexander, in Petersburg, who wrote enquiring anxiously after Nikolai, Anton Pavlovich replied that it was no use asking if he would recover, that all that could be asked was, how much longer he could live.

Nikolai carried with him to the grave a great portion of Chekhov's own life.

His death was both a final farewell to Anton's own youth, and the loss of a kindred soul, so near to his own, the loss of something ingenuously poetic, artless and artistic, at once unsophisticated and talented, youthfully lighthearted, childishly trustful.

It was yet another bitter reminder of his own loneliness.

Pushkin sought relief from loneliness in friendship. He moved amongst a refined circle of men and women capable of appreciating what was beautiful. This circle may have constituted a very thin layer of the Russian society of the age, but it made both his personal life and creative activities easier for the poet. In the forties and still more in the sixties, the progressive elements in the country comprised a much wider circle. Nekrasov was well aware that he was supported by Chernyshevsky and Dobrolyubov, that he had a following among the younger generation.

Chekhov's position was quite different. The literary circle in which he moved and the critics of his day were immeasurably below him, of infinitely lesser stature.

All this made his personal grief particularly hard to bear.

Add to this the precarious state of his own health, of which the danger signals were becoming more and more frequent. There was something rather strange about his attitude to his illness—he seemed to be trying to deny its existence.

In October 1888 he wrote to Suvorin:

"Every winter, autumn and spring, and every damp summer day, I cough. But I only get frightened when I see blood: there is something sinister in the sight of blood pouring from one's mouth, like in the glow of a distant fire. . . ."

In the same letter he goes on to say that he had these haemorrhages for the first time four years before, and that he had noticed blood in his sputum several times since, and yet he was sure that he was not consumptive. If the haemorrhage of 1884 had been a sign of consumption, he would have been dead by now. "Such is my logic," he concludes.

Knowing the inexorable logic of Chekhov, we feel that there is something wrong here, that in the depths of his heart he could not have been content with this superficial reasoning.

He tried to assure both his friends and himself that he was not ill. At a later period he wrote to Lika Mizinova, with his characteristic reserve: "I am not quite well. I cough almost all the time. I suppose I missed my health the same way that I missed you."

This coupling of the ideas of lost health and lost love is significant. Evidently he stood in constant fear that what was personal—a great love, the anxious awareness of a fatal disease—would encroach on his work, preventing him from concentrating on what was most important. And as yet he had not discovered what it was that was most important. He needed another "forty years of study" before he could become a real writer, "every hour was precious. . . ."

It *bored* him to have to think about being ill.

And the terrible cough and fatal haemorrhages of Nikolai, reminding Chekhov imperiously that he, too, was ill, were like someone's fiendish laughter at the illusions he had created for himself.

Nikolai "was wasting away like a candle" and Chekhov "had not a single minute" in which he could "forget how near the end was."

But even during those sad days of watching over the illness of one so dear to him, nursing his brother with the utmost tenderness, Chekhov remained true to him-

self in the ruthless clarity of his observation of life and human beings. In the same letter to Alexander in which he speaks of Nikolai's inevitable and imminent death, he adds that Nikolai is fretful, behaving to those around him "like a General." "Nikolai," says Chekhov with melancholy malice, "seems to imagine he really is a General. He is terribly exacting."

One is involuntarily reminded of what Gorky once said in a letter to Chekhov:

"I have formed an instinctive impression of the image of your soul—it is a very stern one, I think."

In June 1889, the painter Chekhov died.

"Poor Nikolai is dead," wrote Anton Pavlovich. "I have turned stupid and dull. I'm bored to death, there's not a penny-worth of poetry in life, I have no desires, etc., etc."

The death of his brother affected Chekhov deeply, and seemed to be closely interwoven with the obstinate ideas tormenting him. The death of Nikolai, the memories of the life his brother had led, formed a new and melancholy current in the main stream of Chekhov's thought.

He could not get away from his persistent thoughts of "a general idea," a great purpose in the life of man. Sad and joyous personal experiences alike were inextricably interwoven in his mind with these thoughts.

Life lacking a definite outlook is appalling. How appalling, then, must be the dying hours of a thinking man who has never known any purpose in life!

Nothing but the consciousness of a life of intelligent effort, the sense of personal contacts with the future, the belief that "something in me will never die," that my joys and sufferings, my labours will not disappear without a trace, but will be absorbed, if only as one small drop, into the ocean of the life of the people, the country, the world—nothing but this consciousness is capable of clothing the life and death of man with dignity.

THE RULING PRINCIPLE

In the second half of 1889 appeared one of Chekhov's most important works—*Dull Story.*

It will be remembered that Chekhov had conceived the idea, the year before, of writing a story about a "thinking man" who finds himself bankrupt at a critical moment in his life, because he discovers he has no definite outlook on the world.

The moods and reflections caused by his brother's death broke in on the original idea and changed it.

The theme of a thinking man who has no "ruling idea" and therefore comes to grief when faced by difficult problems in his personal life is closely linked in *Dull Story* with that of the spiritual bankruptcy of such a man when confronted by death.

The whole atmosphere of *Dull Story* is permeated by the thought that the hero is doomed to die in the near future. To prevent the mind of the reader from being distracted from the main theme of the story, the hero is of an age when it is normal to be thinking about the approach of death. He is sixty-two.

In order to emphasize the theme of the sufferings of a thinking man, Chekhov makes his hero a well-known scientist, a professor of medicine.

The mood of this work is sombre.

Observation made at his brother's death-bed, very likely thoughts of his own illness, his ability as artist

and doctor to identify himself with his "patient"—all this helped Chekhov to describe the inner world of a man living in daily expectation of death.

There are two principal characters in *Dull Story*—the old professor and Katya, a young woman who lost her parents in early childhood and was brought up in the professor's family. Katya's father, an eye-specialist, appointed the professor his daughter's guardian. The professor loves Katya more than he ever loved his daughter, he loves her more than anything in the world. He has long been a stranger in his own family. And Katya herself looks up to her guardian as to the highest authority on everything.

Before the story begins Katya has had an unsuccessful career on the stage, and met with much adversity. In her own way she goes through the same sufferings as her guardian does. She misses "the ruling idea"! She feels she cannot live without a conscious aim in life. Katya is the only joy left to the old scientist, but he loses her, too, for he is unable to answer the question with which she comes to him. It is the same traditional Russian question: *what ought we to do*? The last talk between them, after which she drops out of his life for good, and, judging by her mood, perhaps drops out of life itself, reveals the appalling emptiness of the principal character's inner world.

In her despair Katya appeals to him:

" 'Nikolai Stepanich! I can't go on living like this! I can't! For God's sake, tell me, tell me quickly, this moment—what am I to do? Tell me what I am to do! . . .

" 'You are wise, educated, you have lived a long time! You have been a teacher. Tell me—what am I to do?' "

And he answers: " 'On my soul, Katya, I don't know. . . . Let's have breakfast, Katya.' "

He understands her sufferings all too well.

"I had only noticed in myself," he muses, "the lack of

what my philosopher colleagues call a general idea a short time before my death, in the evening of my days, and the soul of this poor creature will find no haven for a lifetime, a whole lifetime!"

But how is he to help his darling when he does not know how to help himself?

He gives a sharp definition of his own complaint:

"... And think as I would, it was clear to me, however far-flung my thoughts, that something essential, the main thing, was lacking from my desires. My passion for science, my desire to go on living ... my attempts to know myself, all these thoughts, sensations and conceptions of mine had nothing in common with one another, nothing which might weave them into a single whole. Each thought and feeling was isolated within me, and the most skilful psychologist would fail to find in all my criticisms of science, the theatre, literature, my pupils, in all the pictures which my imagination painted, anything which might be called a general idea, or serve as a god for a living man.

"And if this is missing, then everything is missing.

"Given such poverty of spirit, any serious indisposition, the fear of death, the influence of circumstances and people, is sufficient to upset and break into smithereens everything I have been accustomed to regard as my mental outlook, everything in which I used to see the meaning and joy of life. It is therefore no wonder that the last months of my life are being darkened by thoughts and feelings worthy of a slave or a savage.... When that which is higher and stronger than all external influences is lacking in an individual, a violent cold in the head is quite enough to unhinge him and make him see an owl in every bird, hear a dog's howl in every sound....

"I am defeated...."

With his dislike of sounding phrases, Chekhov called this heart-rending story of an old scientist, who, on the

verge of the grave, comes to the conclusion that he does not know what he has lived for, *Dull Story*. But if the emotions which have the hero of the story in their grip may be described as *dull*, we are up against quite a new interpretation of the word "dullness," akin to that given by Byron, when he extended the meaning of the word "melancholy" to that of *Weltschmerz*.

It has already been remarked here that Chekhov reflected in his writings the quest and aspirations of a section of the Russian democratic intellectuals, unable to reconcile themselves to bourgeois society, feeling the hostility of this society to culture and its representatives in themselves, but ignorant of the revolutionary way out, and therefore alien to the revolutionary path.

In *Dull Story* Chekhov presents, with the utmost acuteness and profundity, the fundamental problems which beset the path of intellectuals in bourgeois society. Bourgeois society is incapable of inspiring intellectuals with the lofty ideals common to all mankind, to the entire nation. In bourgeois society even the best, the most honest section of the intelligentsia is doomed to intellectual and psychological shallowness, degeneration, and a spiritual vacuity which is tantamount to spiritual death. The only way out of this "dull story" lies in the acquisition of great social ideals which the "masters" of bourgeois society are incapable of advancing.

Lack of any integral conception of the universe, of a consciousness of the meaning of life, of vital ties with human beings, isolation of thought and feeling, each of which exists "in a vacuum," the split in consciousness—all these are inevitable in a society broken up into separate particles, in a society not inspired by a common goal, a ruling principle. The specific features of an age, eagerly searching, beneath the yoke of reaction, for new aims, new ideals, the heartsickness of an artist, who cannot live without some great, inspiring ideal—all enabled Chekhov

to present a subject of no temporary, transitory interest, but of broad, universal significance.

Thus, once again the rule is proved according to which the artist who can treat with depth the most important themes of his time, thereby creates works reaching far beyond the limits of the age.

In an age in which decadence, lack of ideals and philistinism prevailed among greater part of the intelligentsia, Chekhov, and his heroes are obsessed by the longing for a "ruling idea."

Chekhov did not wish to be like those characters of his who replied to the question: "What ought we to do?" with an honest but helpless: "I don't know!" It is not enough for the reader to know that the author was an honest man. He wants to be told *what he ought to do.* And Chekhov felt it his duty to answer that question.

DISTANT JOURNEY

Soon after the death of his brother, Anton Pavlovich astonished his friends and relations by an unexpected decision. He began making preparations for a journey to Sakhalin.

Chekhov's brother, Mikhail Pavlovich, relates that "Anton Pavlovich began making preparations to go to the Far East so suddenly and unexpectedly, that at first it was hard to understand if he were serious, or only joking."

Why did he make up his mind to go to Sakhalin, and not some other place? He had never before displayed any particular interest in this island.

The journey to Sakhalin was in those days a most serious affair, extremely exhausting and by no means without danger. The great Trans-Siberian railway did not as yet exist. Travellers had to cover over two thousand miles in a cart with no springs. Anton Pavlovich knew very well that he would have to put up with dirt and discomfort on the way, that the mighty Siberian rivers would be in flood, that every bone in his body would be shaken, and that there would be numerous other ordeals, hard enough for a perfectly healthy man to endure. He had only recently refused the offer of an extremely pleasant outing on the grounds that his cough was always worse when travelling by rail. But what would the shaking of the railway carriage be in compar-

ison with a post-chaise, and that not for one day or two, but for week after week!

No one could understand the decision of Anton Pavlovich. People asked him what he was going for, wrote him astonished letters. Chekhov passed it all off with a joke, tried to make out the journey to be a whim of his, to put it down to his desire for a change, "a good shaking-up," but if his questioners became too insistent, he would assume a serious expression: he wished to write a scientific work, a dissertation on Sakhalin, and thus, to some extent, pay back his debt to medicine—his "legitimate spouse," whom he had abandoned for literature, his "mistress."

If the version of the "whim" was accepted, it was hard to understand why the "shaking-up" must take place in a post-chaise, and why the journey must be made to Sakhalin of all places. If what he needed was a "shaking-up," surely an ordinary comfortable journey abroad would be much more suitable! As a matter of fact, after his return from Sakhalin, Anton Pavlovich really did take such a journey.

If it was a question of a practical aim, it was still not clear why he needed to write a dissertation on Sakhalin. At one time Chekhov had done much intensive work on a scientific theme of the utmost interest—a history of Russian medicine, for which he had gathered copious material. If he was so anxious to "pay his tribute to medicine" by bringing out a scientific work, why not return to a theme he had already begun to work on, and was more or less master of? Or why not, when all is said and done, choose any theme he liked, not requiring a difficult journey?

It is certainly a fact that Anton Pavlovich wanted to write a scientific work. But it is also a fact that he by no means revealed all the motives determining him to go to Sakhalin, and therefore "led astray" his relatives,

his friends, and, we may add, his biographers. One of these latter, on the grounds of Chekhov's own statements, summed up all the motives for the journey as follows: "The 'tiresome dreary existence' which Chekhov had dragged out up to this time had contained no such 'two or three days' " (Anton Pavlovich had written in a letter to a friend that there would no doubt be "two or three days" in his travels which he would remember his whole life, either with delight or grief.—*Author.*) "and they were absolutely necessary, otherwise there would be nothing to live for. It is this which we regard as the true explanation of Chekhov's decision to go to Sakhalin."

The biographer does not notice that he has given no answer to the main question: Why was it necessary, to win two or three vivid days, to go to Sakhalin and not, let us say—Nice?

Chekhov knew very well that Sakhalin, turned into a place of hard labour and exile by the tsarist government, had become an island of horrors. He fully realized that he would be up against every known form of human degradation and suffering concentrated in one spot. His hypersensitiveness to suffering and pain made it a certainty that his stay in Sakhalin would be a period of unbroken torture for him.

The key to the discovery of the most important factors in Chekhov's decision must be sought in two of his utterances. One is to be found in his reply to the astonished question of Suvorin: What did Anton Pavlovich want with Sakhalin? Suvorin wrote that there was no point whatever in the journey, since no one needs Sakhalin, and no one is interested in it. Before taking his correspondent to task, Chekhov emphasized his complete lack of any pretensions whatever.

"I am going with the conviction that my journey will contribute nothing of value either to literature or to sci-

ence—I have neither knowledge, time, nor pretensions for this."

Further, he proceeds to explain his journey by a motive, which if not the principal one, undoubtedly had some importance: "The journey will be an unbroken six months of work, both physical and mental, and this is essential for me, for I have . . . become lazy. One must keep one's self in training."

And then he turns to the main point. It is here that he betrays his irritation at Suvorin's letter and admits what are the true motives for his decision to make the journey.

". . . You say no one needs, no one is interested in Sakhalin? But is that true? Not more than twenty-five or thirty years ago some Russians, our own people, investigating Sakhalin, accomplished remarkable feats, feats which incline one to worship man—and we don't need all this, we don't know who those people are, we can only sit at home and mourn that God made men so evil. Sakhalin is a place of intolerable sufferings, the fiercest that can be endured by man whether at liberty or in captivity. Those who have worked there, and in its neighbourhood, have solved problems of vast importance. . . .

"From the books I have read and am still reading it is obvious that we are letting millions of people rot in prisons—and to no purpose, irrationally, barbarously. We have driven people with shackled limbs thousands of miles in the cold, infected them with syphilis, created criminals, and shuffled all the blame on the shoulders of red-nosed gaolers. It is not the gaolers who are to blame, but we ourselves, all of us; but this is nothing to us, it does not interest us!"

Here Anton Pavlovich seems to check himself—does not all this smack of pretentiousness, is it not too much like a declaration, belauding the great results to be ex-

pected from his journey? He returns to the modestly prosaic tone of his letter.

"But I assure you Sakhalin is needed and is interesting, and the only pity is that it is I and not someone else, knowing more about the matter and better able to arouse public interest, who is going there.

"Personally I am going there in search of trifles."

Another statement of Anton Pavlovich, in which a valuable admission slips out, is found in a letter to Shcheglov. The latter had expressed the opinion that modern criticism is after all of some use to the writer. Chekhov objects that if criticism were really any use to writers "we should know what we ought to do, and Fofanov would not be languishing in a lunatic asylum, Garshin would still be alive, Barantsevich would not fall into dejection, and the rest of us would not be so bored as we now are; you would not feel the call of the theatre, or I the call of Sakhalin."

The biographer who explains Chekhov's journey to Sakhalin merely by his desire to gain two or three vivid days regards Chekhov's words to Shcheglov just quoted as a mere expression of ordinary "boredom," and the ordinary attempt to shake off this boredom by means of a "change."

But we know very well what "boredom" meant in the language of Chekhov, and what his dissatisfaction with contemporary criticism meant. We know that he called the yearnings of a man with no "ruling idea," a "dull story." His dissatisfaction with the critics was part and parcel of the yearning for great aims and ideals. And it is precisely with *these* yearnings that he connects his decision to go to Sakhalin.

The purpose of Chekhov's visit to Sakhalin was, above all, merged with his quest for a reply to the eternal question: "What ought we to do?"

During an era of "small deeds," in which the intellectuals lacked ideals, Chekhov found that for which Russian writers have always striven—scope for heroism.

If anyone had told him that his journey to Sakhalin was heroism, he would have laughed. He did everything in his power to "belittle" his journey, to make it out a trifle. But heroism it was. And this, not on account of his disease, the hardships of the way, the exhausting, uninterrupted six months of work, but because it was an attempt to come face to face with the truth in all its horror and let the whole world hear it.

A writer sometimes sets off on some exotic, onerous distant journey under the stimulus of failure, in the interests of his reputation, his fame. Chekhov, as we know, was not pleased by his popularity. He feared his own fame, was afraid of becoming a "fashionable writer." He felt as if he were "deceiving his reader" because he did not point out to him the purpose of life.

By taking the journey to Sakhalin he wished to "repay the debt" not so much to medicine, as to his conscience as a Russian writer.

The Russian writer has always felt his responsibility before the people for the whole life of the country.

When Chekhov wrote: "We are letting millions of people rot in prisons," and "We have created criminals, and shuffled all the blame on the shoulders of red-nosed gaolers," he meant exactly what he wrote. He felt with his whole being his personal responsibility for the crimes of the tsarist government.

In criticizing the liberals for reconciling themselves to the horrors of tsarist Russia, Lenin stressed the fact that the liberals are contributing to the political degradation of the population by the tsarist government, enfeebling "the consciousness, already feeble enough, of the average Russian's sense of responsibility as a citizen, for *everything* the government does."

In everything he wrote Chekhov tried to cultivate in his readers that very sense of responsibility, which was so exceptionally powerful and keen in himself. And his decision to go to Sakhalin arose from this sense.

There was yet another serious reason for the journey. Chekhov knew that in its course he would meet many new acquaintances, would see the life of the country on the long journey. The environs of Moscow, Petersburg, the familiar southern places, the Caucasus, the Crimea, the Ukraine—all these could not satisfy his insatiable thirst for knowledge of his country.

The preparations for the journey were made by Anton Pavlovich with his usual scientific thoroughness and accuracy. He made an intensive study of a veritable library of books on the most varied branches of science. History, ethnography, geology, biology, the criminal code, prison procedure, meteorology, geography—such were the sciences which Anton Pavlovich set himself to study, many of them for the first time. "I sit over my books all day," he wrote, "reading and making extracts.... It is a madness—*mania Sachalinosa*.... I have to be a geologist, a meteorologist and an ethnographer."

In April 1890 Chekhov's relations and friends saw him off to Yaroslavl. There he embarked on a steamer to Kazan, from where he sailed down the Kama River to Perm, and thence by rail to Tyumen, after which—hail Mother Siberia!

The very elements seemed determined to increase the difficulties of the writer's travels. At first he was tormented day and night by a long "terrific cold spell." It was an unprecedentedly late spring. Then, with warmer weather, came such dirt that he did not so much drive, as "wallow" in his chaise. Several times, at the risk of being drowned, he had to cross the Siberian rivers in a small boat, when they were in turbulent spate. Touches which give some idea of his travels are to be found in the let-

ters of Anton Pavlovich to his sister, intended also for the whole family.

"... Dirt, rain, a fierce wind, cold ... and *valenki** on my feet. D'you know the feeling of wet *valenki*? They're like boots made of cold brawn. We drive on and on and suddenly a huge lake extends before our eyes, with earth showing here and there in patches, and bushes sticking out of it—flooded meadows. The steep banks of the Irtish can be seen in the distance. We start driving through the lake. I would turn back if I were not so obstinate, and I am suddenly seized by a strange kind of defiance, the same defiance which made me bathe from a yacht in the Black Sea and that has made me perform not a few follies.... It must be a psychic state. We try to pick out the islets and dry strips as we drive on. The direction is shown by bridges big and small floating on the surface; they have all been swept away by the floods. To make our way along them we have to unharness the horses and lead them singly. The driver unharnesses them, I jump into the water in my *valenki* and hold their heads.... Highly amusing. And now rain, wind.... Save us, O Mother of God...."

He also describes a collision between his own carriage and another, from which he only escaped with his life and was not crippled by the merest chance.

Despite all the hardships of the way Anton Pavlovich kept up his spirits. He sailed over 600 miles down the Amur, enjoying the majestic beauty of the scenery.

His feelings for his country developed a wider scope. He felt both joy and sorrow. He saw much that was coarse, sad, he was infuriated by the savage despotism of the local authorities. But his observations of the peas-

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* A pair of boots he bought for the journey turned out to be tight, so he had to wear *valenki*—high felt boots.—*Ed.*

ants, the simple Russian folk, with the daily heroism of their toil in the then prevailing conditions in Siberia, were bright and joyous. In his travel sketches entitled *From Siberia* he notes a conversation with a peasant, who told him: "In a general way there is no truth in Siberia. If there were any, it would have been frozen to death long ago. And it is the duty of man to seek this truth." Chekhov tells of a young peasant woman and her husband who had adopted the child of a passer-by, a common woman, and had become so fond of it that they dreaded the mother returning for it. The woman spoke of this possibility with tears in her eyes, and her husband, too, did not want to give up the child, "but he's a man, it would be awkward for him to admit it." "What splendid people!" exclaims Chekhov, unable to repress so unusual an expression of his feelings. And in a letter to his sister he exclaims: "Heavens, how rich Russia is in splendid people!"

The long road has ever evoked in Russian writers the image of boundless space, arousing melancholy yearnings for the fettered, bewitched forces of the people, the anticipation of happiness to come! And the Russian doctor and writer—consumptive, coughing, but steadily observant—rattled over it in the springless cart, driven by the restless, indefatigable Russian conscience to embark upon the long journey.

For the first time Chekhov saw in the broad Russian road a powerful image of his native land. The vague anticipations of the country's blossoming out, which coloured *The Steppe* with such exquisite poetry, were confirmed in his soul. This was not as yet the overwhelming emotion of the immediate nearness of happiness which is so striking in Chekhov's stories of the second half of the 1890's and the early 1900's, but already, on this distant journey, Anton Pavlovich was making significant notes for his sketches *From Siberia*.

"Life began with a moan on the Yenisei, but one day it will rise to heights as yet undreamed of by any of us.... Krasnoyarsk, the best and most beautiful of all the Siberian towns, stands on this bank, and beyond the other bank are mountains which are as misty and dreamy as the Caucasian Mountains. I stood thinking: 'What a full, wise, audacious life will light up these shores in time to come!'"

The whole boundless land was open to his gaze, with its gifted people, honest, powerful, searching for the truth. And the more clearly the image of the great native land rose before his thoughts and feelings, the sadder it was to realize that it was given over to the power of the hangmen and dunces, the Prishibeyev elements—the more he longed to exclaim: *This cannot go on!*

On arriving at Sakhalin, Chekhov started immediately on his great work of investigation, feverish, tense and yet systematic and well thought out. The tensity of the work is explained by the fact that he had only a very short time at his disposal—three months in all—otherwise, owing to navigation conditions, he would have had to stay a whole year in Sakhalin.

"I don't know what will come of my work," he wrote towards the end of his stay on Sakhalin, "but I've done a great deal. I have enough material for three dissertations. I get up every day at five and go to bed late, and go about all day under the strain of thinking what a lot there is still left to do. By the way, I had the patience to make a census of the entire population of Sakhalin. I travelled all over the settlement, went into all the huts and talked to everyone. I used the card-system for my census and have already registered about ten thousand convicts and residents. In other words, there is not a single convict or resident in Sakhalin who hasn't spoken to me. I was most successful of all with the children, whose registration will be very useful, I hope."

In October he set off on the homeward journey by sea, via India, Singapore, Ceylon, Port Said, Constantinople, Odessa. In the China Sea the steamer was caught in a violent storm. In the Indian Ocean, moved by that selfsame incomprehensible defiance, he plunged into the sea from the bows while the ship was going full steam ahead, getting back by climbing up a rope flung to him from the stern.

The luxurious dazzling scenery, the palm groves, the bronze-skinned women, all was so strange after Sakhalin.

"I'm full to the brim with satisfaction," he wrote to Shcheglov, "so crammed with delight that I want nothing more, and would not take it amiss if I were to have a paralytic fit or went to kingdom-come by way of dysentery. Now I can say: *I have lived. I've had enough.* I have been in hell, otherwise Sakhalin, and in paradise, that is to say the Island of Ceylon."

The impressions gathered on his journey were vast, rich and complex.

Every day spent on Sakhalin brought some shock or other.

"I have seen hungry children," he wrote in a letter to the famous progressive lawyer A. F. Koni, "I have seen thirteen-year-old prostitutes, pregnant girls of fifteen. Little girls begin to practise prostitution when they are twelve years old. Churches and schools only exist on paper; the only education children get is the criminal atmosphere in which they grow up."

Bearing in mind Chekhov's stories about children, penetrated as they are with the tenderest sympathy for the little ones, and remembering the pain that the slightest unkindness to children caused him, it is not difficult to realize what the encounters and talks with the Sakhalin children must have cost Chekhov.

Chekhov witnessed floggings on Sakhalin. The sight was such a shock to him that he afterwards dreamed of these terrible scenes and woke up in a cold sweat.

He brought with him from Sakhalin a bitterness which lasted throughout his life.

But the journey furnished him with an access of fresh inner forces, fresh courage, raised him to a new level of ideological consciousness, of creative awareness.

"My brief Sakhalin past seems to me so immense that when I want to talk about it I don't know where to begin, and I always have the feeling that I am not saying what I really want to."

"Think what a cross-patch I should be now if I had stayed at home! Before my journey, Tolstoi's *Kreutzer Sonata* was an event to me; now I simply find it absurd and silly. Whether my journey has matured me, or whether I've gone mad—God alone knows."

The tone of these remarks clearly shows that vast waves were stirring within him, and something as vast as the ocean itself was seeking an outlet.

Before starting on his book *The Island of Sakhalin*, Anton Pavlovich made his first trip abroad. Vienna, Venice, Bologna, Florence, Rome, Naples, Genoa, Nice, Paris flashed past him in the space of six weeks.

Italy charmed him as it had charmed Gogol before him.

He marked with the bitterness of a Russian patriot all that testified to a standard of living in the countries of Western Europe which was more progressive than the standard in Russia at that time. But despite the potent charm of the splendid continental towns, and an atmosphere in the bourgeois-democratic countries which appeared free in comparison with that of tsarist Russia, despite his worship of the treasures of art and culture, he did not lose his head here, either.

He was disgusted by the arrogance of the well-nourished bourgeoisie. Monte Carlo struck him as a concentration of bourgeois triviality, something like a universal "de luxe w. c. There is something in the air that seems

to insult your decency, to vulgarize nature, the sound of the waves, the moon."

On his return to Russia Anton Pavlovich set to work on *The Island of Sakhalin*, at the same time working on some stories.

The writing of the book on Sakhalin demanded fresh, supplementary research—sometimes he had to read a pile of books for the sake of producing a single sentence. He desired to give his readers a picture of Sakhalin at once artistic and scientific. "I busied myself over the climate of Sakhalin the whole of yesterday. It's hard to write about such things, but at last I really do think I got it. I have given a picture of the climate that will make the reader shiver."

The Island of Sakhalin was published serially in *Russkaya Mysl*, a liberal periodical. This extremely original work, combining as it does depth, precise scientific research and literary art, is a powerful revelatory document, a real blow at the autocracy, at a society of exploiters. Chekhov remained true to his habit of outwardly impartial narrative, and the more detached and calm his investigations seemed to be, the greater was their effect on the imagination of the reader.

He always dreamed of combining science and art. In one of his letters there is a most interesting remark on the kinship of scientific and artistic thought and their future synthesis, destined to represent "a gigantic, a vast force."

In his *Sakhalin* he endeavoured to create such a synthesis. The book produced a great impression both in scientific circles and among the reading public. Its reverberations were so powerful that the tsarist government was actually compelled to appoint a commission to go to Sakhalin and "regulate" the situation there, but needless to say, this had almost no practical significance.

It is noteworthy that Chekhov himself, never satisfied by his work, was content that "this harsh convict's robe should have a place in his literary wardrobe."

The utility of purely fictional writing was always dubious to him. But this book accomplished something indisputably practical, it drew attention to terrible ulcers, disturbed the peace of all sorts of "gracious gentlemen." In the eyes of Chekhov, it was honest, unpretentious, above all it represented *work.*

MELIKHOVO

Early in 1892 Chekhov purchased the estate of Melikhovo not far from Moscow, in the Serpukhov District, about ten miles from the station of Lopasnya, on the Moscow-Kursk railway line.

Melikhovo was a smallish estate which the former proprietors had allowed to run to seed. The Chekhov family—Pavel Yegorovich (the writer's father), Yevgenya Yakovlevna (his mother), Marya Pavlovna, (his sister), and Anton Pavlovich himself—all people inured to hard work, soon put the estate in order and even gave it a presentable appearance. The low log house with its verandah, flower-beds and picturesque miniature lake, stood in the midst of a grove of venerable trees. In the path leading to the house there were nesting boxes on tall trees, and a board bearing the inscription—*Starling Brothers*. Everywhere was immaculate cleanliness.

Grace, cleanliness and diligence emanated from the life of the Chekhovs in Melikhovo.

As usual, Anton Pavlovich worked from early morning till late at night. Much of his time went on work connected with the local peasantry.

The peasants began to appear at the Chekhov house every morning, asking for medical treatment. Marya Pavlovna, on whom the whole household hung, helped Anton Pavlovich in everything, including medical treatment, the issuing of medicine, the dressing of wounds.

Chekhov plunged whole-heartedly into village life. The peasants learned to love him. He used to say that when he passed through the village the women used to greet him "cordially and affectionately, as if he were the village idiot."

The writer of these lines was fortunate enough to hear a wonderful speech made at the opening of the Chekhov Museum in Melikhovo, September 1944, by a contemporary of Chekhov's, a Melikhovo peasant who later became a collective-farm brigade leader. It was impossible to listen unmoved as the old peasant confessed that he considered himself and his fellow-villagers guilty of the illness and early death of Anton Pavlovich. They worried him too much with their affairs, requests, sicknesses, and all the wearisome details of that village life which has now become a thing of the past. His hearers thought of *The Muzhiks*, *The New Country-house*, *In the Gully*, and remembered the accursed rat-trap that life in the village used to be, how dark, confused and hopeless everything was. And who is to blame if Chekhov sympathized with the peasants in their bitter troubles?

He carried on intensive social work as a member of the Zemstvo assembly, was a patron of the village school, got schools built (at his own expense, needless to say), and was responsible medical officer and organizer during the struggle with the cholera epidemic.

During the epidemic, when Anton Pavlovich undertook gratis the direction of the cholera section, exceedingly heavy work fell to his share. The Zemstvo had no funds; with the exception of a single tent, Anton Pavlovich had no headquarters in his district and was obliged to go about to neighbouring manufacturers and persuade them to take part in the struggle with the epidemic. He was often looked upon by these as a tiresome petitioner. Thanks, however, to his energy and insistence, "the whole section, which included as many as twenty-five villages

and hamlets, was soon covered with a regular network of essential establishments. For several months Anton Pavlovich scarcely left his carriage. He had to travel about the territory of his section, to receive patients at home and to do his literary work during that period. He would return home broken and exhausted, but once there, joked and behaved as if what he was doing was nothing."

Chekhov's participation in the struggle with the cholera epidemic, by bringing him into closer contact with Zemstvo officials, led to his election to the Zemstvo assembly. Mikhail Pavlovich relates that his brother "readily attended the Zemstvo meetings and took part in the investigation of a number of their problems. But most of his attention was absorbed by matters of public health and education.... He always wanted to know what new roads were intended to be built, what new hospitals and schools were to be opened. It was, by the way, to him that the local population were obliged for the prolongation of the high road from Lopasnya to Melikhovo and the building of schools in Talezh, Novoselki and Melikhovo. He took an enthusiastic part in the building of these schools, drawing up the plans for them himself, seeing to the purchase of materials and watching over the building. These schools were his pets. When he spoke about them his eyes glowed, and it was obvious that, given sufficient means, he would have built not three, but innumerable schools. I remember his conspicuous figure at the opening of the school in Novoselki, when the peasants brought him the icon with the traditional bread-and-salt.... By no means an experienced orator, he replied shyly to their expression of gratitude, but his face and the gleam in his eyes showed how pleased he was."

Chekhov disliked amateurishness in public affairs as much as he did in the sphere of art. He did everything with the businesslike gravity so characteristic of him, thinking out every detail thoroughly.

Of course this was the merest taste of the life of social endeavour for which he thirsted.

With regard to his art, however, Melikhovo did much for Chekhov, enriching him with the knowledge of aspects of life new to him.

Anton Pavlovich could not live without company in Melikhovo either. He invited anyone for whom he had the slightest liking to visit him. Music, singing and reciting were constantly heard in Melikhovo. And he went to Moscow fairly often. He now had many friendly ties in circles of the liberal and progressive intellectuals of his day. Every visit he made to Moscow was a day of rejoicing for his friends and acquaintances. His stories were now published only by the most progressive firms.

The Melikhovo period—1892-98—was a time in which Chekhov's genius reached a high level of maturity.

PROTEST

The journey to Sakhalin had a profound influence on the whole of Chekhov's work. In addition to broadening the writer's sense of life, his feeling for his country, it intensified in the highest degree the note of protest in his writing, of detestation for the entire accursed social system.

The whole life of his country seemed to him, after his journey to Sakhalin, like some terrible hard-labour colony. The cramped, stifling gaol-like atmosphere of Russian life at that time was becoming more and more unbearable to him. The feeling of being cooped within four walls was getting more and more acute.

"How dreary, oh my friends!" he exclaims in a letter of 1891. "If I'm a doctor, then what I need is a hospital and patients; if I'm a writer, then I must live amongst the people, and not on Malaya Dmitrovka with a mongoose.* I must have some little scrap of social and political life—this life within four walls, without nature, without people, without a native land, without health or appetite, is no life. . . ."

Everything going on in Russia then seemed to him life within four walls, with gaolers, prison bars—life without politics, without public affairs.

From these feelings sprang the famous *Ward No. 6*,

* Chekhov brought a mongoose back with him from Ceylon.—*Ed.*

one of the most terrible and wrathful works of Russian and world literature, directed against despotism, oppression, tyranny. It was not for nothing that the youthful Vladimir Ilyich Lenin said to his sister Anna Ilyinichna: "When I read that story yesterday I simply had the creeps, I could not stay in my room, I had to get up and go out. I felt exactly as if I were locked up in Ward No. 6 myself."

The social importance of this story, serving as it did as a psychological focus for the impulses of protest, of detestation for the autocracy, was immense. *Ward No. 6* was one of the marked symptoms of the phase of social uplift just beginning, an important stone in the historical wall separating the eighties from the nineties, the era of decadence from the era of uplift.

The plot and subject of the story are of the utmost simplicity.

In a remote provincial town, far from the railway line, is a hospital which has been under the management of Dr. Andrei Yefimich Ragin for the past twenty-five years. The hospital is in a state of utter neglect—filth, uncared-for patients, thieving are its main features. Once upon a time, long, long ago, Dr. Ragin had set about his work energetically, had striven to bring about improvements, but he had soon realized the hopelessness of all attempts to regulate affairs. Baffled by general indifference in all quarters, he had come to the conclusion that the very existence of such a hospital was immoral, but that it was no use breaking one's head against a stone wall; he was not the author of the evil, and there was nothing left for him but the purely formal fulfilment of his duties. He shut himself up in his room and went in for reading books on philosophy and history, a decanter of vodka and a salted cucumber ever at his elbow. A gentle, refined man, quite incapable of making his will felt, Ragin could not bring himself to give orders even to his cook.

"... He goes cautiously to the kitchen door, gives a little cough and says:

" 'How about dinner, Darya?' "

An exhaustive description of Dr. Ragin's character is given in the following words:

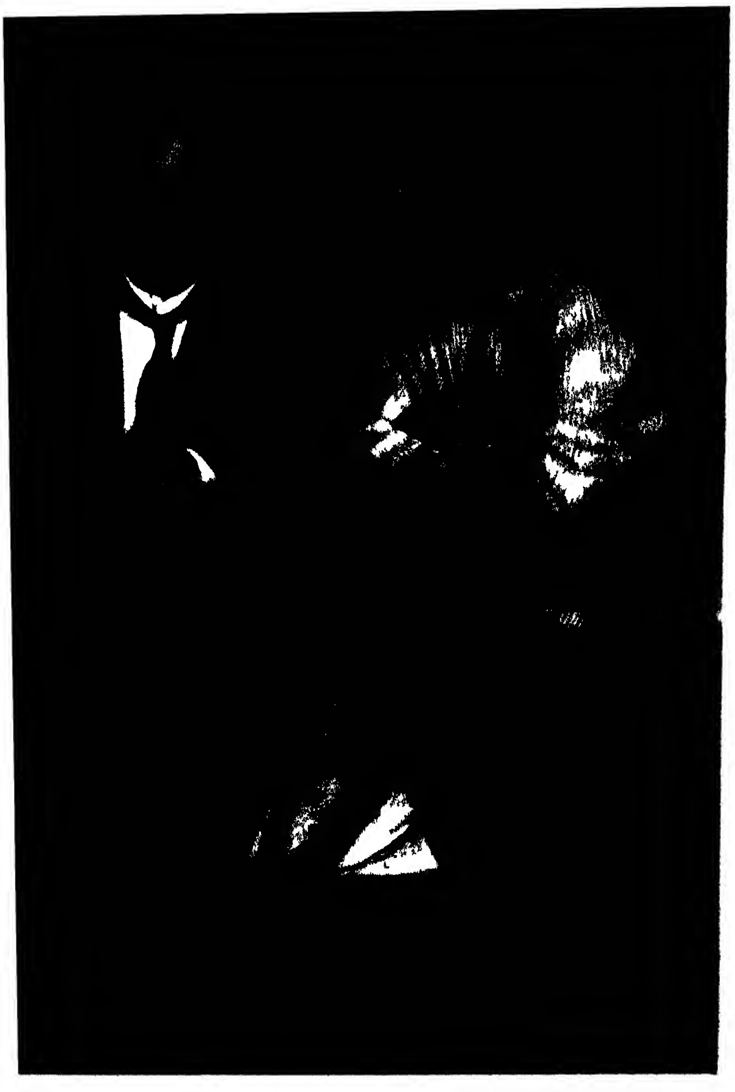
"Andrei Yefimich strongly appreciates wisdom and honesty, but he has not the strength of character, the confidence in his own rights, which would enable him to organize the life around him on an honest and rational footing."

He gradually built up for himself a whole system of philosophy. "Thought, unshackled, profound striving for a full comprehension of life, together with utter contempt for the vain bustle of the world—these are blessings higher than any that makind has ever known. And you may possess them in spite of all the barred windows in the world." Such was his profession of faith. "Men must seek peace and satisfaction not in the world outside them, but in themselves." Therefore why struggle, why go to any trouble, why try to improve life, get any sort of system into it? "Marcus Aurelius said: 'Pain is the lively conception of pain; with the aid of your will-power you can alter this conception, shake it off, stop complaining, and the pain will disappear.' "

Whilst Andrei Yefimich gave himself up to such musing, getting further and further away from reality, the hospital fell completely into the hands of thieves, and the guardian of law and order became the hospital watchman, Nikita. This was a coarse, dull-witted agent of tyranny, who beat the mentally unsound patients cooped up in Ward No. 6 unmercifully for the slightest infringement of the prison regime.

Andrei Yefimich, happening to go into Ward No. 6 one day, noticed an intelligent patient there, and was delighted to discover, in conversing with him, a keen, lively mind. Everything about this man, who thought with such

A. P. Chekhov at Yalta, 1900



Anton Chekhov and Maxim Gorky at Yalta in 1900

intensity, felt with such subtlety and suffered so atrociously, attracted the doctor. He gradually became fond of talking to this patient. He was the only man in the whole town with whom Andrei Yefimich could discuss philosophy. The enjoyment Ragin derived from conversing with him was on a high intellectual plane, despite the fact that their talks were invariably violent arguments. The patient—Ivan Dmitrich Gromov—thinks on lines diametrically opposed to the thoughts of Andrei Yefimich. Gromov strives to prove the necessity for action, for a struggle for liberty, protests with his whole being against oppression, enslavement, violence; his speech, in the words of Chekhov, is a "pot-pourri of old songs which have not yet outlived their day." These are the "songs" of the sixties and seventies, the songs of freedom. Who knows? Someone may take up the old refrain and make it sound in a new way.

Gromov exposes the philosophy propounded by Andrei Yefimich as essentially inhuman, though Andrei Yefimich himself was of course a kindly man of irreproachable honesty, very far removed from inhumanity of any sort. "You see a peasant beat his wife, for instance. Why interfere? Let him beat her, they'll both die, sooner or later.... We are kept here behind bars, beaten, allowed to rot, but all this is splendid and rational, for there is no difference between this ward and a warm comfortable study. A convenient philosophy, indeed! There is nothing to be done about it, your conscience is clear, and you feel you are a true sage.... Yes, indeed!" You despise suffering, but if your little finger were to be squeezed in the door, you would probably cry at the top of your voice!"

The frequent discussions between the doctor and the patient, the eccentricity of Andrei Yefimich, arising from solitude and complete isolation from life, give those around him grounds for suspecting that he has gone mad

himself. Khobotov, Ragin's assistant, a careerist who wants Ragin's job, is sure that Andrei Yefimich, who has scarcely a farthing to bless himself with, must be a rogue, so Khobotov deftly exploits his position for his own profit. Andrei Yefimich is declared insane and locked up in Ward No. 6.

And here his whole philosophical system topples over. He no longer reminds himself that one could be happy even behind prison bars. On the contrary, with the support of Ivan Dmitrich Gromov, he raises a regular riot against violence and oppression. Nikita beats them both with his heavy fists. Andrei Yefimich falls on his cot; "all of a sudden, flashing through the chaos and filling his mind, came one thought—terrible, unbearable: the pain he was now experiencing must have been felt for years on end, day in, day out, by all these people"—by Ivan Dmitrich and by all the other prisoners in Ward No. 6. "How was it that for over twenty years he had not known of it or had wished not to know of it? He had not known, had not had the slightest idea of the pain, therefore he was not to blame, but his conscience, as rude and implacable as Nikita, sent a cold shiver down his spine."

The next day Dr. Ragin died of an apoplectic stroke.

All Russia saw in the story a symbolic narrative of the brutal power of the autocracy in the image of Nikita and felt as if she were locked in this ward. The young Lenin expressed the feeling of the whole country, thunderstruck by the simple and incomparable force of Chekhov's images. *Ward No. 6* was a challenge to the struggle with the innumerable Nikitas.

At the same time there were any amount of Andrei Yefimiches who heard the implacable voice of conscience, the menacing blow of the hammer. Conscience, the Russian conscience in the person of Chekhov adjured them: it is you, charming, tactful, humane, well-educated Andrei

Yefimiches, you and none other, who are leaving men to rot in prison, in an immense Ward No. 6, and putting the blame on the "red-nosed gaolers," just as the big-hearted Dr. Ragin allowed unfortunate beings to rot in a dungeon for twenty years, and put the blame for it on Nikita! You are to blame for all the crimes of the tsarist government, in that you have not opposed them, have consoled yourselves with all sorts of charming philosophies. It is noteworthy that in his exposure of Andrei Yefimich, Ivan Dmitrich Gromov uses the words written by Chekhov to Suvorin in the letter already quoted. "We are letting men rot in prisons," wrote Chekhov. Gromov says: "We are kept here behind bars, beaten, allowed to rot...."

Chekhov struck a blow not only at the autocracy, but also at intellectual magniloquence, at the abstention from struggle, whatever the arguments it was cloaked in, and above all at the reactionary Tolstoian doctrine of "non-resistance to evil."

The truth revealed by Chekhov in *Ward No. 6* was a tragic one for himself. What hope was there of getting out of prison? Who was to break up "Ward No. 6"? Who would sing the songs which "had not yet outlived their day"? This Chekhov did not know. But he was beginning to realize that violence must be countered not by bursts of impotent rage, but by a struggle. Andrei Yefimich is charming in his meek helplessness, so refined and intellectual in the face of the vulgarity and crudity of life—but of what use were all his splendid qualities? And Ivan Dmitrich Gromov was honest, daring, generous, truthful, but he, too, turned out to be weak. Andrei Yefimich, finding himself locked up with Gromov in the ward, says to him: "We are weak, my friend.... I was indifferent, I reasoned cheerfully and sanely, but the moment I feel the rude touch of life, I lose heart ... *prostration*.... We are weak, wretched.... You, too, my friend! You are

intelligent and high-minded, you imbibed noble impulses with your mother's milk, but you had hardly begun life when you wearied and fell ill.... Weak, weak!"

This became one of the most important, fundamental themes treated by Chekhov in the nineties and the beginning of the next century—the exposure of the weakness of the intellectuals of those days.

An extremely significant stroke in *Ward No. 6* is the fact that Nikita, that personification of all the violence, the Prishibeyev features of life, is mentioned as the possessor of ton-weight fists—"there is something imposing about his carriage, and his fists are massive. He is one of those single-minded, reliable, efficient and dull-witted persons who value order above everything else in the world, and believe that there is nothing like a good beating. He showers blows indiscriminately on faces, chests and backs, convinced that there is no other way to keep order." Dr. Ragin, so infinitely gentle, so spineless, whose refinement is such that when people lie to him or "flatter him, or bring him an obviously false account to sign, he turns as red as a lobster and, feeling like a criminal, signs the paper"; the intelligent, helpless Dr. Ragin is described as surprisingly like Nikita in appearance. The outward appearance of Ragin is in the most astonishing contradiction to his inner nature. Here we have the contradiction of strength and weakness, coarseness and gentleness.

"He is a heavy, coarse, peasant type; his face, beard, straight hair and strong, ungainly frame suggest the proprietor of a wayside inn, well-fed, stubborn and harsh. His grim countenance is covered with a network of blue veins, the eyes are small, the nose is red. He is tall and broad-shouldered, with enormous hands and feet, and looks as if he could fell an ox with his bare fists. But he walks softly and his gait is cautious, furtive; encountering anyone in a narrow passage, he is the first to stop

and give way, saying, 'sorry!' not as you might expect in a deep voice, but in reedy, gentle tones."

The unexpectedness of the reedy, apologetic tenor instead of the deep voice it would be natural to expect from such a sturdy, rough appearance, emphasizes the contradiction between the appearance and the inner nature of Andrei Yefimich. In this contradiction, which is after all quite natural and frequently met with in real life, there is indisputably hidden satire, a touch of the Chekhov irony. This is particularly marked when it comes to the features which Andrei Yefimich and Nikita have in common. Nikita has a grim face and so has Andrei Yefimich, they both have an imposing carriage, and it is worth noting that they both have red noses. But, and most striking of all, Andrei Yefimich's fists are no whit less heavy than Nikita's. So it isn't that Andrei Yefimich hasn't got the fists—he could deal a knock-out blow. But what's the good of that, what can Andrei Yefimich do? "We are weak, wretched." And yet he could use his fists if he chose. The fact is this Dr. Ragin is a stout fellow, and his powerful fists dangle vainly. He ought to be just as stubborn and rough as Nikita, if he really had a conscience. Such are the satirical implications of this description when taken in connection with the remarkable words: "conscience, as rude and implacable as Nikita." Here one is reminded of a passage in *The Story of an Unknown Man*: "If we would feel at once free and happy, it seems to me we must not conceal from ourselves that life is cruel, coarse and ruthless in its conservatism, and that we must answer it in its own coin, that is, be like it, coarse and ruthless in our struggles for freedom." The advice Anton Pavlovich gave his brother Alexander is also apposite—to be as hard as a flint, to assert his right as emphatically as *our* father asserted *his* conservatism. The salt of life is to be found in dignified protest.

In criticizing Andrei Yefimich, Chekhov is of course criticizing himself, his own weakness. But with this criticism he shows himself to be head and shoulders above such men as Andrei Yefimich, with their resignation which, however refined in its form, was inherently false.

The tragedy of his life consisted in the fact that to the end of his days he never met those who, at the time *Ward No. 6* was producing a furore in the country, were preparing to oppose violence by force. These new people read the story of Dr. Ragin and Ivan Dmitrich Gromov with wrathful pity, with love and respect for the poetic genius, the uncompromising conscience of the truth-loving Russian writer.

"WE LIVE ON THE EVE OF A GREAT TRIUMPH"

In the second half of the nineties, Chekhov returns again and again to the theme of happiness, reflecting, with his inherent sensitiveness to social atmosphere, the political upsurge then beginning, which was to culminate ten years later in the first Russian revolution.

The theme of happiness, now enriched by suffering, quest, painful reflection, had gained in depth. Anton Pavlovich returns to the theme of *The Steppe* from another angle. And just as the inhabitants of a seaside town are continually aware of the sea, even when it is invisible, the reader of Chekhov's stories, in the nineties and the beginning of the twentieth century, is aware of the boundless breadth of life underlying their sadness; somewhere deep down, in the intonations, the very music of the Chekhov poetry, we catch a note of "triumph, youth, the blossoming of latent forces," a glimpse of the image of "our beautiful, austere native land."

For instance, the grim atmosphere of the shop is revealed in *Three Years*; the Zamoskvorechye district, with its perpetual commercial gloom affords sinister pictures. Here we are confronted by the familiar Chekhov sobriety of outlook, the bleak truth to life underlying all his preceding work. But never before does Chekhov show in his work how confidently he foresaw the nearness of some decisive, abrupt change throughout this apparently hopeless life.

One of the principal characters in this tale, Yartsev, a young chemist who earns his living by teaching in a school, is strongly reminiscent of Astrov (*Uncle Vanya*) and other characters of the type Chekhov was so fond of depicting—a poet and artist in his soul, the mouthpiece of the author's innermost thoughts, from now on beginning to make themselves felt more and more in Chekhov's work.

"... How rich and varied Russian life is! Oh, how rich! Every day I become more and more convinced that we are living on the verge of a great triumph, and I want to live to see it, to take part in it myself."

The young people of the day rejoice his heart:

"Believe it or not, but in my opinion a wonderful generation is growing up now. Teaching children, especially girls, is simply a pleasure to me. Marvellous children!"

Both Yartsev and his friend Kostya, a plebeian intellectual, a "cook-maid's son," are in love with their country. Yartsev dreams of writing a play based on Russian history, because, he tells Kostya, "everything in Russia is extraordinarily talented, gifted, interesting." "Both Yartsev and Kostya were born in Moscow, and adored that city.... They were convinced that Moscow was a wonderful town and Russia a wonderful country ... they considered their grey Moscow weather the nicest and healthiest in the world."

The sense of the nearness of a great triumph for the native land arose in Chekhov from his belief in the talent and strength of the Russian people.

Chekhov's profound patriotism was reserved and austere in its manifestations, like all his deeper emotions. Here is a characteristic touch. Depicting (in *The Wife*, 1892) a type he particularly disliked—disagreeable, tactless, egoistical, a "gentleman" without the slightest living, spontaneous feeling for human beings, Chekhov

endowed him, in the first version of the story, with his own patriotic feelings, but later rewrote these passages. This character travels in a sleigh through a village stricken by famine, and is suddenly struck by the indestructible power, the greatness of the Russian people. The story is in the first person:

"When my eyes fell on a smiling peasant," runs the first version, "on a lad wearing huge mitts, on huts, I suddenly realized that there is no disaster capable of subduing these great-souled people, and it seemed to me that there was already a feeling of victory in the very air; I felt proud, I could have shouted to them that I, too, was a Russian, blood of their blood, bone of their bone." And it was precisely these intimate words of Chekhov: "I, too, was a Russian, blood of their blood, bone of their bone," which were afterwards deleted by the author. They did not apply to the man, *he was not worthy of them.*

Chekhov's faith in the infinite spiritual forces and beauty of character of the Russian people was indestructible, and increased in volume in his work, became interwoven with his ever more absorbing prevision of the happy morrow in store for his country.

And he continued in his quest for the ruling principle which should enable him to find the way to the triumph of the native land, to freedom, with ever-increasing ardour. His quest was closely connected with the question which never ceased to haunt Chekhov: *Who* is to lead the country to triumph?

THE NOT-HEROES

Chekhov did not meet with heroes in contemporary life capable of waging the struggle against actual conditions, of striving for freedom, resolutely, rationally, consistently. Gorky did meet such people and made them the heroes of his tales. But Chekhov would have been morally and historically entitled to say of himself, in the words of Astrov, that he had cleared a path for the future, opened the way for new literature, new characters. As a matter of fact he subjected to a searching impartial analysis all the main aspects of the active men, the "heroes" advanced by the intellectuals of the eighties and nineties, creating a portrait gallery of their types. And while carrying on this artistic research of his he became, to his sorrow, more and more convinced that there was among them no true hero, capable of exerting any real influence on life, of altering it for the better. The task fulfilled by Chekhov was that of a critic. He discarded the "heroes" then playing a role on the surface of the age and claiming to be important leaders, ever stressing the necessity of finding a new hero. But he was unable to set up the image of the new hero. While Gorky gave his readers, through his characters, the images of those who were, historically speaking, heroes, showed who it was that ought to be followed, Chekhov showed who these heroes were *not,* who it was that *must not* be followed. He created a veritable portrait gallery of *not-heroes*.

Anyone wishing to form an idea of the average Narodnik of the eighties and nineties, to gain a living picture of his psychic outfit, to understand Chekhov's own attitude to this type, cannot fail to be interested in the figure of Vlassich (*Neighbours*). Vlassich is an honest, decent fellow, but infinitely dreary and tedious, for ever carrying on "wearisome, commonplace conversations about peasant communities, or the development of the homecrafts ... conversations all exactly like one another, which seemed to have been prepared not in a living brain, but by machinery." Vlassich "passes for a Red in the district, but even this is uninteresting in him. There is neither originality nor pathos in his free-thinking; he waxes indignant, he become wrathful and rejoices all on the same note, with the most languid effect.... When he begins, slowly, with a profoundly significant air, to relate the moments which were the most honourable and bright, the best years of his life, you are reminded of something old that you read long, long ago...." Something remote from real life, something pertaining to the past, something cramped, infinitely boring—such was the sensation which emanated, for Chekhov, from the liberal followers of Narodism, who vulgarized the heritage of the "best years." Chekhov was, of course, far from theoretical, political clarity in his relations to Narodism, but the intuition of the artist, of the most truthful investigator of Russian conditions, the knowledge of these conditions which made itself felt with such force in stories like *The Muzhiks, In the Gully, the New Country-house,* helped Chekhov to an understanding of the inability of the popular leaders of the eighties and nineties to introduce into contemporary life anything real, progressive, anything which should ease the sufferings of the people appreciably.

A striking example of this is *The House with the Mansard,* in which the pettiness and poverty of liberalism are criticized, while the aspirations are cherished with far from

real political insight, but with true passion, to sunder the "great chain" fettering the people. How much of true love for the people, of sympathy for their sufferings there is in this brilliant story! Not for nothing was Nekrasov Chekhov's favourite poet, and not for nothing did the artist-hero of *The House with the Mansard,* who was a vessel for Chekhov's own thoughts, quote Nekrasov in his arguments with Leda Volchaninova, the typical Zemstvo liberal lady.

Chekhov had a way of expressing social ideas of striking depth and originality in such unassuming forms that contemporary critics frequently overlooked their rich content, fancying that nothing but the usual literary subjects—love, the loneliness of human beings—were being treated, and not noticing that in the mind of Chekhov love and loneliness and all other themes had an undercurrent of something individual, new. This quality, which we have described as expressing ideas in unassuming forms, is characteristic of Chekhov, as we have seen, from his first steps as an author. It was inherent in his whole personality as a man and a writer, with his whole aesthetic theory of "inconspicuous" beauty.

Chekhov's remark that Dostoyevsky's books were "good, but lacking in modesty, pretentious" is highly characteristic. What did he mean by pretentious? Apparently he meant Dostoyevsky's perpetual efforts to stress the special significance, the lofty, eternal, "universal" meaning underlying the sufferings and ideals of his heroes, and also the pretentious reactionary utterances of Dostoyevsky, who came forward as a Messiah, revealing the way to salvation for humanity.

Chekhov's artistic methods were in utter contrast to all this. Ideas remarkable for the breadth and the novelty of their social and philosophical content are frequently expressed in his works "by the way," as if they were not the main point, expressed in the reserved Che-

khov manner, which had its roots in the most complex emotions. These emotions were composed partly of his sensation of his own inability to show his readers the way to that *great triumph* of the country to which he was calling them, and partly of the sage surmise as to the worthlessness of the old schemes and dogmas; of the consciousness that even his favourite characters, even those whom he felt to be closest to himself, were unable to confirm their good words with deeds; of the feeling, constant in Chekhov, expressed through the words of his heroes: "Nobody knows the real truth" (*The Duel*); of the faith in people somehow or other drifting towards the real truth; of the consciousness that all the good, reasonable, just ideas expressed by him through his heroes were mere quests for the truth; and of his dislike to what was "lacking in modesty, pretentious," sermonizing, not based on the scientifically exact knowledge of the laws of life. The preaching of Tolstoi also seemed to Anton Pavlovich to be lacking in modesty.

The House with the Mansard is one of Chekhov's most poetical works. The hero of the story is an artist who has come to spend the summer painting landscapes on the estate of a friend. In the house with the mansard, on the next estate, lives a family consisting of an elderly woman and her two daughters. The older daughter, Leda, is an enthusiast for Zemstvo activities. She teaches in the Zemstvo school, and prides herself, though the family is well-off, on "earning her living," receiving, as she does, a monthly salary of twenty-five rubles. She is completely absorbed in her work in the Zemstvo, the conflict between the liberal "set" and the reactionaries in the district, and nothing exists for her outside the school, the dispensary, the medical posts. With her beauty and austerity she seems to her mother and younger sister, Zhenya, a remote, inaccessible personage, such as the captain of a ship withdrawn in his cabin appears to the

sailors. Zhenya is not regarded as a grown-up person in the family, and goes by the name of Missie, because that was what she used to call her English governess when she was a child. She worships her elder sister, but is more intimate with her mother—they understand each other better than they understand the inaccessible Leda.

Missie, with her naive youthfulness, her timid, awakening femininity, is one of Chekhov's most charming girls. A friendship quickly springs up between the artist and Missie, and soon they fall in love. They are akin to each other in a spontaneous and poetical conception of life, they could have been happy together.

But the implacable Leda dislikes the artist for his contemptuous attitude to her work in the Zemstvo, and for what she regards as his lack of principle. She destroys the happiness of the artist and Missie, sending her younger sister somewhere far away, with her mother, to visit an aunt in the Penza Province. When the artist arrives at the house with the mansard, Missie is no longer there. Everything seems different without her. Leda informs him coldly of the departure of her mother and sister. "And in the winter they'll probably go abroad. . . ."

Stunned, he returns home, but a little boy runs after him and hands him a note. "I told my sister everything and she insists that we part. . . . I had not the heart to grieve her by disobedience. May God send you happiness —forgive me! If you only knew how bitterly Mamma and I are crying!"

The story, which is told in the first person, ends at a time many years later when the artist was beginning to forget the house with the mansard: ". . . but every once in a while, painting or reading, I recall for no apparent reason the green light in the window, the sound of my own steps echoing in the nocturnal fields that night I returned home, in love, chafing my cold hands. Still less frequently, in moments of loneliness and melancholy, I

yield to vague memories, till I gradually begin to feel that I, too, am remembered, that I am being waited for, and that we shall meet....

"Missie, where are you?"

This concluding sentence of *The House with the Mansard* has become famous; everybody repeated it, and it was quoted everywhere, like a favourite tune. Everyone felt the subtle beauty of poetic grief over past joys, youth, the springtime of life. And the story must be read in a spirit of lyrical melancholy, closely akin to Turgenev's: "How sweet, how fresh the roses...." Chekhov received letters from readers, of which the following is an example: "I have just read your latest story in *Russkaya Mysl.* There is such exquisite poetry in it, so much of the Turgenev spirit, that I felt I must express my gratitude to the author for the pleasure he has given me."

Well, yes, *The House with the Mansard* really is a story of lost happiness, of the vanished poetry of life....

But the intimate poetry of the subject (which may, by the way, have been extremely close to Chekhov's personal life, for does not he write in a letter that he once had a fiancée who was called Missie, and that he means to write a story about her?) is inextricably blended with a great social theme.

What is it that the anxious Zemstvo worker and the carefree artist argue about?

Leda once described the difficulties experienced in connection with the organization of a medical post. The artist says that in his opinion "a medical post was not required in Malozemovo." Leda protests.

" 'Last week Anna died in childbirth; if there had been a medical-aid post in the neighbourhood she would be alive now. I can't help thinking that even landscape-painters should deign to have some convictions in this respect.'

" 'I have extremely definite convictions in this respect,

I assure you,' I replied, but she hid from me behind the newspaper, as if not wishing to hear me. 'In my opinion medical-aid posts, schools, libraries, dispensaries, only serve the cause of enslavement, under existing circumstances. The people are fettered by heavy chains, and you do nothing to break them asunder, only add new links—there you have my convictions.'

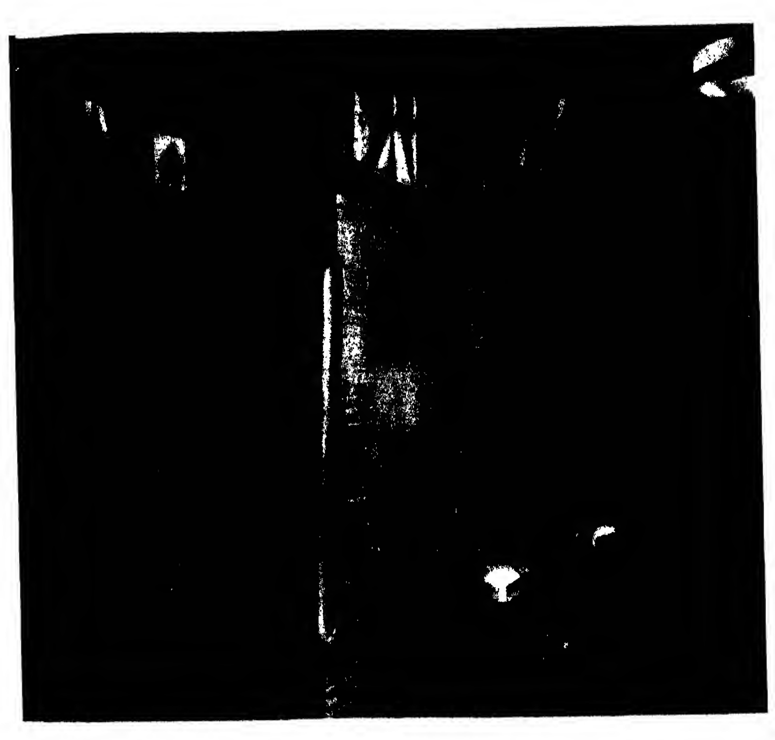
"She raised her eyes to my face and smiled scornfully, but I went on, endeavouring to pin down my basic idea.

" 'What matters is not that Anna died in childbirth, but that Anna, Martha and Pelageya must stoop over their work from morning to night, fall sick from onerous toil, spend their whole lives worrying over their hungry, sickly children, in fear of death and disease, dose themselves all their lives, fade early, age early, and die in filth and stench. As soon as their children grow up, they follow the example of their mothers, and hundreds of years pass like this, millions of people living in worse conditions than animals, merely to gain a crust of bread, to live in perpetual fear....

" '... Peasant literacy, books full of wretched moralizings and popular maxims, and medical-aid posts can no more lessen their ignorance or their mortality rate than the light from your windows can light up this huge garden....

" '... If treatment is required, let it be, not of disease, but of its causes.... In such conditions the life of the artist is meaningless and the more talented he is the worse and the more incomprehensible his function, since superficially it would appear that he works for the entertainment of a predatory, unclean animal, by supporting the existing order of things. And I don't want to work, and I won't....'"

We will omit Leda's arguments, since she has already expressed the strongest of them—the death of a peasant woman who would still have been alive had there been a



A corner of Chekhov's study in his Yalta house, now a museum

Chekhov's bedroom in his house in Yalta

medical post in the vicinity. This argument would seem to be powerful enough to leave the artist without a leg to stand on.

And yet Leda is fundamentally and radically wrong.

We see here how many of his own most cherished and haunting ideas were put into the mouth of his hero by Chekhov. Here we have sad ruminations on the senselessness of, the lack of moral justification for, the work of the artist in bourgeois society, if this work does nothing to change the existing order, thereby supporting this accursed "order"; we observe also the Chekhov quest for a radical solution of social problems, the dislike of social remedies and nostrums proffered as a substitute for removing first and foremost the causes of the disease, in other words, altering the unjust social structure.

Leda considers the artist lacking in principle. In exactly the same way the liberal-popular critics considered Chekhov an artist who lacked principles. But it is easy to see how infinitely above the hair-splitting complacent-liberalism of Leda are the longings and dissatisfaction of Chekhov and his hero.

Neither Chekhov nor his heroes know how to sunder the great chain. When the artist, trying to put his thoughts into words, endeavours to "nail down his basic idea," we understand that this is Chekhov himself trying to elucidate for the benefit of himself and his reader what the truth really is.

The artist is in a considerable muddle. In particular, he is quite wrong-headed in his statement that hospitals and schools are not wanted. Here, Chekhov is by no means at one with his own hero; we know the energy Anton Pavlovich expended on these same "schools, libraries, dispensaries."

But in the very bitterness of the artist, in his quest, his unwillingness to support the existing regime, in the very confusion of his thoughts, even in his disgust with

his art, his strivings for radical, and not private, petty solutions of social problems, there is infinitely more justice than in the smug mediocrity of Leda. Zemstvo activities have become a kind of shell for her, she can only see "one thing," like Dashenka in the story *Carelessness*. Here we have a portrait of a liberal lady-proprietor, for whom the artist's vague but earnest strivings to break the accursed chain are utterly alien and incomprehensible.

Vladimir Ilyich Lenin and all Marxists in general, never denied that there was a certain usefulness in the activities of the Zemstvo, in the "dispensaries and libraries." Lenin did not absolutely reject the possibility of progressive legal activities under the autocracy. It was not the activities of the representatives of "progress in miniature" to which he objected, but their illusion that they were by these activities waging war on the autocracy, their hair-splitting complacent mediocrity, their inability and reluctance to go beyond the limits of small-scale progress, their adoption of the platform of bourgeois democracy in their struggle.

These liberal illusions were alien to Chekhov, he held them up to scorn; what irony he pours on the high-flown statement of the demoralized Andrei Prozorov in *The Three Sisters* that by working in the Zemstvo he is "serving the cause"! Himself a Zemstvo worker, Chekhov saw the infinitesimal progress possible to be achieved on the basis of work in the Zemstvo. Not for nothing did he call upon the intellectuals, in the words of the heroine of *My Life*, to "overstep the limits of ordinary activities." Not for nothing did he compare all the achievements of the Zemstvo, in the spheres of mass education and hygiene—precisely those spheres which Anton Pavlovich knew best—with the windows of a house, which were incapable of throwing the light behind them all over the huge garden.

The poet F. Batyushkov, a contemporary and friend of Chekhov, and a man with radical views, expresses a curious attitude to *The House with the Mansard* and to the change that had come over Chekhov's writing:

"Even granting that there is a touch of parody in the speeches of the artist," he writes, "... it is, nevertheless, perfectly clear that the author shares his views in essentials. What is needed is a fundamental change in the whole of our social conditions, and he makes no secret of the direction in which the change must be made.

"Chekhov did not, of course, invent any new social doctrine, but his ear was attuned to the tendencies and atmosphere beginning to make themselves felt in Russia in the mid-nineties, and he expressed his sympathy with them in no uncertain tones. His attitude to what we call Marxism or neo-Marxism, to Social-Democratic views, was quite different from his attitude of a few years before to Narodism, to Tolstoism, to the liberal traditions of the sixties. He saw clearly that though these new theories had come to us from abroad, the youth of Russia had adopted them spontaneously and assimilated them 'from within.' These were no mere phrases, no mere repetition of the words of others, no senile prattling about the glorious days of old, for the sake of which the present was forgotten, but something living and stirring, full of significance for the present, and fraught with beneficent results in the near future. A new note began to make itself heard in Chekhov's writing. His outlook began to crystallize around one or two points ... he served the cause of emancipation by the exposure and elucidation of life, by testing the stimuli to activities, by psychological analysis of the individual in varying surroundings."

We will not dwell on the confusion of terminology and interpretation in Batyushkov's review. What is interesting is that a contemporary saw in *The House with the Mansard* aspirations towards a fundamental change

in the social regime, discerned a turning-point in the development of Chekhov's work, and expressed the idea that Chekhov was helping on the emancipatory, revolutionary movement by exposing contemporary life and "testing the stimuli to activities" on all sorts of types, the representatives of various classes and various social groups in his own age. As for what Batyushkov says about Chekhov's attitude to Marxist doctrine, there is every ground for considering his remarks as completely unfounded, despite the writer's personal friendship with Chekhov. Chekhov did not of course know Marxist literature, if we do not count legal Marxism (or neo-Marxism, as F. Batyushkov called it). One thing only is indubitable —the upward curve in the revolutionary movement of the working class, making itself felt in the atmosphere of the whole country, could not have failed to influence—if only indirectly—the mind and work of Chekhov.

"The artist," Chekhov writes in a letter, "must not set himself up as a judge of his characters, but must remain an impartial observer." In his writing Chekhov—at first involuntarily—retreated further and further from this standpoint. He *was* the judge of his characters, and frequently a very severe one. His endeavours to be not a judge but an impartial observer sprang from his feeling of profound responsibility before the reader, his detestation of the pretentious preachings of the age, whether issuing from liberals and Narodniks, or from the followers of Tolstoi and Dostoyevsky, who considered themselves the torch-bearers of absolute truth and justice.

The author of *The House with the Mansard* tried to solve for himself and his readers a great and difficult problem, and failed to do so. He lends an attentive ear to Leda's arguments, finding in them a certain amount of truth—not for nothing did he provide Leda with so weighty an argument in her discussions with the artist. Chekhov by no means leaves out of account Leda Volcha-

ninova, with her arguments and her activities—this is no mere liberal self-advertiser or professor of the Serebryakov type. No, hers is real practical work, practical aid for living people, which cannot be lightly set aside, especially by Chekhov, who knew of nothing better but was only conscious of the wretched inadequacy of this help, only instinctively aware that someone, somewhere, will be able to find a path to the real historical work, will be able to heal not only the diseases themselves, but, above all, the causes giving rise to them. For us the solution of the argument between Leda Volchaninova and the artist is quite clear. For Chekhov the argument was fraught with tragedy, for it touched upon the most vital point, and he had no idea how to solve it. But this only makes it the more significant that Chekhov, while agreeing with Leda in her insistence on the necessity for schools, dispensaries and medical posts, and disagreeing with the artist's nihilism, yet, with the whole force of an artistic, poetical treatment of the theme, condemns Leda's self-satisfaction, her unwillingness to overstep the bounds of her useful but infinitesimal activities, so pitiful in comparison with the needs of the people.

All the poetical logic, the artistic objectivity of the characters in this story, all its inner music, are directed against the liberal "shell," the lifelessness, the narrow dogma, the reluctance to look real life in the face. And it is this lifelessness, this lack of poetry, this callousness, the using of the individual's "infinitesimal" services as a cover for utter indifference to the main, fundamental questions of life—all that forms the essence of philanthropy, which makes Chekhov dislike Leda. Philanthropy is a safety-valve in the machinery of autocracy.

This original definition of philanthropy belongs to Chekhov—it comes from *In the Gully*: "Her alms (those of Varvara, wife of the village shop-owner Tsibukin) acted as a safety-valve in machinery."

The unreality, meanness, coldness and narrowness of Leda Volchaninova's social position are reflected in the unrealness, coldness and prosaicness of her attitude to vital, profoundly human emotions, to the poetry of life. After all, it was Leda who dealt a death blow to the love of dear little Missie and the artist, Leda who tyrannically separated the lovers, destroyed with cold assurance their happiness. Thus the character of Leda Volchaninova is thoroughly debunked. What could be more devastating to anyone's character than to be shown as the hangman of love! And this is precisely the capacity in which Leda Volchaninova, with her cold, stiff beauty, is presented to us. And, oh the cold, hopeless boredom, the intolerable dullness, the tedious school-marm hair-splitting, the matter-of-fact ironical attitude to love, the despair coming from Leda's voice to the artist, stunned by the unexpected news that Missie has gone. "A bit of cheese.... A crow had ... somewhere ... found ... a bit of cheese." The fable is a good one, and Leda is doing a good work in her teaching, but what boredom, what coldness, what narrowness, what scornful retreat from all that is great and living, what complacency, emanate from her!

And this voice of Leda, as she dictates, these words: "A bit of cheese.... A crow had somewhere found a bit of cheese..." amount to a miracle of art comparable to the mention of the map of Africa in the last act of *Uncle Vanya*, of which Gorky wrote to Chekhov that it was like the blow of a hammer on the heart. In both these cases—in *Uncle Vanya* and in *The House with the Mansard*—an acute sensation of the transfer from one situation to another, in a quite different, remote section of life, is conveyed, and what only a moment before was pulsating with life is now far, far away, and we are left with a feeling of loss, a wonderfully clear sensation of the narrowness and poverty in store. Chekhov is an adept at

these transfers, he possesses a truly miraculous power of creating in the reader, with a single stroke, and that an indirect one, a genuine sensation of change, of the complete alteration of human life. But for this power the stories of Chekhov would not be what they are—novels in brief.

The critics of the day were incapable of appreciating the great social theme of *The House with the Mansard.* The most liberal paper of the time—*Russkiye Vedomosti* (*Russian News*)—declared that the hero of the story was a typical representative of Chekhov's "gloomy characters," which is exactly what he was, with the well-known traits of "boredom, lack of inspiration, creative impotence, consciousness of his inability to finish what he had begun, lack of the social instinct." Another liberal paper—*Birzheviye Vedomosti* (*Stock-Exchange News*)—wrote that in the person of the hero of *The House with the Mansard* the reader meets with a representative of an undesirable type, whereas in the person of Leda he will see a representative of "that section of Russian society working as yet in obscurity, but engaged in an unceasing struggle against insuperable obstacles." According to this paper the story affords "on an infinitesimal scale a picture of the whole of Russian society, split as it were in two halves—on the one hand, carefree quietism, on the other, the youthful forces of an individual devoted to the service of her fellow-man."

It would take a liberal on the same level as Leda herself to see in the artist's melancholy, in his dissatisfaction, in his quest, "carefree quietism," and to glorify Leda's Zemstvo activities as "service." It is not hard to imagine Chekhov's ironic smile as he read this review. Perhaps he remembered the liberal critic's "service" later, when working on *The Three Sisters.*

It is not to be supposed that the enthusiasm of those readers who gushed over the "Turgenev features" in

The House with the Mansard gave Chekhov any particular pleasure, either. After all, such praise merely showed that those expressing it had failed to notice the inner theme of the story, had been deaf to the very thing over which the author had expended so much arduous endeavour, attempting, together with his hero, "to elucidate his own idea to himself"—the great idea of the sterility of liberal illusions, the narrowness of "progress in miniature," the question: what is to be done? The liberal critic, of course, was unable to perceive how high Chekhov had risen above the limitations of liberalism. And there was no one to tell Anton Pavlovich that the true beauty of *The House with the Mansard* lay, not in the reproduction of "Turgenev features," but in the subtle, poetical combination of mourning for lost happiness in love, and mourning for the happiness of all. As is always the way with Chekhov, a simple, apparently perfectly ordinary plot, hallowed by tradition, is merged into a thesis, new in its philosophy, and of general application. The tender image of Missie stands for an image of beauty itself, of youth, of that purity of life of which the people have been robbed.

Chekhov sought for new paths, a new outlook. The very interest he took in Tolstoi's preaching, which attracted his attention for a certain period, came of his instinctive rejection of liberalism and the liberal Narodism leaders, with their smugness and narrowness. He fancied, true for only a very short time, that Tolstoism represented aspirations towards a radical solution of great social problems, that it was based on a knowledge of the real life of the people, that Tolstoi's doctrines might be a help in the search for truth. A proof of this fancy of his may be found, among other stories, in *Good People* (1886).

The main characters are a brother and sister, the brother a typical representative of liberal, possibly liberal-

Narodnik journalism in the eighties, the sister a doctor, a lonely woman nursing a profound sorrow—the early loss of a beloved husband. She worships her brother. "She loved him for himself, for his views, she worshipped his articles, and when asked what her brother did, she would reply in low tones, as if fearing to wake or disturb him: 'He writes! . . .' She would sit beside him when he was writing, never taking her eyes off his moving hand." Her worship of her brother, thinker and writer, "master of the souls of others," and literary critic, is reminiscent of the worship of Uncle Vanya and Sonya for that other "master of souls," the liberal Professor Serebryakov, who wrote and lectured on art for twenty-five years, without understanding a thing about it. But the scales fell from the eyes of Uncle Vanya, and he rebelled against the very individual to whose service he had devoted his entire life. Vladimir Semyonich Lyadovsky, the main character in *Good People*, unlike Professor Serebryakov, is by no means unlikable. He is quite a nice man, but nevertheless he is a variety of the Serebryakov type, a shallow, superficial liberal "leader" of the eighties and nineties. But he is a real, professional journalist, not a mere amateur. "Whenever I caught sight of his slight, dapper, lean figure, his high forehead and mane of hair, or heard him speak, I always felt as if his writing, quite apart from how and what he wrote, was an integral part of him, like the beating of his heart, and that all his views had lain ready-made, like a growth in his brain, while he was still in his mother's womb. In his very gait and gestures, the way he shook the ash from his cigarette, I could read his whole programme from A to Z, with all its fussiness, tedium and honesty. . . .

". . . This was a writer who would exclaim with inimitable grace: 'There are very few of us!' or: 'What is life without a struggle? Onward!' although he had never struggled with anyone in his life, or taken a step onward.

And when he began discussing ideals this did not sound affected, either....

"Vladimir Semyonich believed sincerely in his obligation to write, in his programme, cherished not the slightest doubts, and was evidently well pleased with himself."

The detachment and gravity of Chekhov's descriptions, his appearance of even being on his hero's side, the stress on the latter's attractive qualities, expressed in such phrases as: "When, with an inspired countenance, he placed a wreath on the grave of some celebrity, or, looking extremely distinguished and solemn, collected signatures to an address..." all provide a satirical, an almost tendencious undercurrent. Vladimir Semyonich is at his best reviewing a story of village life in one of the "heavies." "He considered the author to be sincere and to have a first-hand knowledge of peasant life. The critic himself only knew this life from books and hearsay, but his feelings and innermost convictions forced him to believe the story....

" 'Splendid story!' he exclaimed, throwing himself back in his chair and closing his eyes from sheer pleasure. 'The author's idea is extremely acceptable.' "

But the moment comes when the thinker's sister, Vera Semyonovna, comes to see the superficiality and essential frivolity of her idol. An important and agonizing process goes on within her. She realizes the sterility of the honest, tedious, narrow views which her brother holds. Like so many of Chekhov's characters she dreams of a solution of the burning questions of the day that shall be not petty and private, but fundamental. And she revolts against her brother's programme. She overthrows her god from his pedestal.

"Yes, Volodya, I have been thinking all these days, torturing myself, and at last I have come to a conclusion: you are a hopeless obscurantist and the slave of routine. Just ask yourself what this diligent and conscientious

work of yours amounts to. What—tell me! Everything that could be got out of that old rubbish you are digging in has long ago been got. You can pound water in a mortar, you can analyze its contents, but there's nothing you can say that the chemists haven't said long ago."

There is no getting away from the fact that the words and sense, the very intonation of Vera Semyonovna are practically the same as those of Uncle Vanya. "Isn't there anything new?" asked Astrov. "Nothing. It's all old," replies Voinitsky. "My old crow of a Maman is still mumbling about woman's emancipation; she keeps one eye on the grave, and with the other hunts through her clever books for the dawn of the new life.

"Astrov: And the professor?

"Voinitsky: And the professor as before sits writing in his study from morning till night. 'We cudgel our brains, wrinkle our brows, writing endless odes, but never hear a word of praise for them or for ourselves!'... Here is a man who has been lecturing and writing on art for precisely twenty-five years, while understanding precisely nothing about art. For twenty-five years he has been mulling over other people's ideas on realism, naturalism and all that rot; for twenty-five years he has been lecturing and writing what wise people have found out long ago, and what foolish people take no interest in. For twenty-five years he has been marking time. And with it all what an opinion he has of himself!"

It was precisely thus that Vera Semyonovna had begun to think of her brother.

When the old liberal crow, Marya Vassilyevna, expresses the desire to talk about some pamphlet or other, Uncle Vanya interrupts her: "But for fifty years we have been talking and talking, and reading pamphlets. It's time to come to a stop.... Up till last year I tried, just like you, to throw dust in my own eyes by means of your scholas-

ticism, so as not to see life as it is. And I thought I was right. And now, if you only knew! I can't sleep at night for vexation!"

Uncle Vanya accuses Professor Serebryakov and his "Maman" of scholasticism. Vera Semyonovna accuses her brother of indulging in alchemy. In both cases the revolt against petty ideas signifies indignation with the appalling narrowness, impracticability, lifelessness of liberalism.

" 'Aha!' drawled Vladimir Semyonich, rising. 'Yes, it's all old rubbish, because these ideas are eternal, but what do you consider to be new?'

" 'You claim to work in the sphere of thought, it is your business to think up something new. It is not for me to teach you.'

" 'So I'm an alchemist!' repeated the astonished and indignant critic, narrowing his eyes humorously. 'Art, progress—all this is alchemy!'

" 'You see, Volodya, it seems to me that if all you thinking people were to devote yourselves to the solution of great problems, all these trivial problems you spend so much energy over would solve themselves. If you go up in a balloon to see a town you can't help seeing the villages, the fields, and the rivers. . . . When they make stearin, glycerin is produced as a by-product. It seems to me that modern thinking has stopped at a certain point and become a fixture. It is prejudiced, languid, timid, it is afraid of a vast, sweeping range, as you and I are afraid of climbing to the top of a high mountain, it is conservative. . . .'

"Every evening she complained of tedium, turned the talk to free thought, to the slaves of routine. Absorbed in these new ideas of hers Vera Semyonovna argued that the work in which her brother was so deeply involved was a mere prejudice, the vain attempt of conservative minds to prolong that which had already done its work

and was disappearing from the scene. There was no end to the comparisons she found. She compared her brother to an alchemist, to a fanatical dissenter, ready to die rather than give up his prejudices."

This story, the work of a young writer, reflects to a certain extent the psychology of the so-called age of social stagnation. The political scepticism of the Chekhov of that period undoubtedly makes itself felt in it. Here we have the most progressive, the "best people" of their day, and how narrow, how one-sided they both are, the brother and sister, how incapable of leading anyone, for they have nowhere to lead them! This was the only sort of "good people" that Chekhov knew. And if he had limited himself to this, to merely demonstrating the narrowness, the frivolity of the liberal, Tolstoian and other "leaders" of the day, his attitude might have completely satisfied Suvorin and *Novoye Vremya*. Indeed, *Good People* shows that there really was something in the ideology of Chekhov in the eighties for Suvorin and the *Novoye Vremya* group to hold on to. And this "something" was the political scepticism of the young writer. But there is another aspect to the story, destined to develop subsequently and save Chekhov from the *Novoye Vremya* group. This aspect is seen in the aspirations, profoundly alien to the latter gentlemen, which rejected them in their entirety—*the search for truth*! In *Good People* may be discerned the expression of aspirations towards a broad solution of social problems, along with which all those little problems on which liberal or liberal-popular thought was fixed would be solved. Chekhov brands this thought as conservative, cowardly, stagnant and sterile. He and his heroes feel the obsolescence, the vacuity of the old, the necessity for new answers to the question set by life, for thought that should be as new, as fresh and as daring as flight. This Chekhov story, early as it is, bears the mark of the quest for a ruling principle.

Vera Semyonovna finds a way out in Tolstoian ideas: she goes to the village. She breaks off with her brother and his ideals for ever.

There is little room for doubt that even then, while influenced to a certain extent by Tolstoian ideas, Chekhov felt their falsity. We are made aware of artificiality, one-sidedness, the usual accompaniments of dogmatism, showing themselves throughout the behaviour of Vera Semyonovna. And her brother, too, has right on his side when he makes fun of this falsity.

"A change in her whole way of life gradually made itself felt. She could lie for days on the sofa, doing nothing, not even reading, lost in thought, with the cold, harsh expression that one-sided, fanatical people often have. She began to give up the comforts administered by the servants, doing her own room, carrying out her own slops, cleaning her shoes and brushing her clothes. Her brother could not repress his irritation, nay his hatred, at the sight of her cold face when she was engaged in menial labour. He saw in the solemnity with which she did this work something unnatural, false, pharisaical, affected. Aware by now that he was unable to shake her prejudices, he teased and taunted her like a schoolboy.

"You won't resist evil," he said, "but you resist the idea of my keeping a servant. If a servant is an evil, then why resist her? It's inconsistent."

Yes, Chekhov saw the Pharisaism, the affectation, the unnaturalness and falsity of the Tolstoians. But, like the heroine of *Good People*, he fancied that in the Tolstoian doctrines, the Tolstoian contempt for gentlefolk's ways, there was an attempt to solve the accursed problems in a broader, more daring fashion. He did not know where to lead his characters, all of whom endeavoured to escape from the vulgarity and pettiness of their surroundings. Much time, thought, grief, a prolonged quest, sometimes even despair lay in wait for Chekhov before, in his last

and most optimistic works, written shortly before he died —*The Bride* and *The Cherry Orchard*, he found a way out for his melancholy, seeking heroes, who were not to be put off with half-truths....

The Tolstoian doctrines were, of course, profoundly alien to Chekhov's very being.

The hero of *The Story of an Unknown Man* is an important contribution to Chekhov's portrait gallery of *not-heroes*.

The Story of an Unknown Man (1893) represents a debunking of the Narodnik terrorist type. The principal character is an apostate who adopts the commonplace theory of "life for life's sake" (that theory of which Chekhov replied to Suvorin with such indignation and scorn).

The ease with which the apostate makes his transition from underground activities, from professional terrorism, to yearnings for peace and "ordinary" joys, the wonderful ease with which his "fall," as he himself calls his change of heart, is accomplished, was undoubtedly due to the absolute staleness, emptiness and bankruptcy of the Narodnik doctrine. The reason why such "falls" were so easily accomplished by people who considered themselves progressives, "individuals endowed with a critical mind," who, only yesterday, advanced and full of "ideals," had descended to philistinism, to "life for life's sake," was a problem which had always interested and perturbed Chekhov. These easy "falls" were in reality typical of those intellectuals of the eighties and nineties who posed as cultured, "thinking" individuals, as "heroes" standing "above the crowd," in a word of all those who thought they could illuminate the great garden with the light coming from their windows. Chekhov was unable to put his finger on the cause of these easy "falls," but he felt that they were due partly to the shallow, flimsy, out-of-date ideological equipment of these contemporaries of his,

their lack of any absorbing *ruling principle*, and partly to their position as isolated individuals.

The "unknown man," entrusted by a secret terrorist organization to assassinate a prominent tsarist official, gets himself employed as a valet by the official's son, whose father sometimes comes to his house. The son, Georgi Ivanich Orlov, is a type of the young bureaucrat in a Petersburg government office. Vladimir Ivanich, the unknown man, becomes the witness of the tragedy being enacted in his employer's home.

Orlov has an affair with Zenaida Fyodorovna, a young married woman. For Orlov it is just one of many affairs. Tainted through and through with a cynical attitude to everything on earth, he treats the true, great love of Zenaida Fyodorovna with the same cynicism. In Chekhov's gallery of feminine portraits Zenaida Fyodorovna is one of the most charming. With her feminine charm, her lively mind, her vivacity, the breadth of her spiritual interests, her purity, strength, the integrity of her love, and, finally, in her fate, her relations with her lover, her break with her husband, her position as a woman no longer loved, in her whole image, she has much in common with Tolstoi's Anna Karenina. For Zenaida Fyodorovna her love for Orlov is a lofty emotion. She sees Orlov not in the least as he really is, she idealizes him, considers him progressive. "You are an idealist, and ought only to serve your ideals," she tells him. She is convinced that Orlov hates and despises his work, that he will leave it one day. For her, love means a decisive step in her life, a bold rupture with her careerist husband, scorn for hypocritical public opinion, in the name of purity, frankness and sincerity. She takes Orlov's irony, which is really nothing but a mask for his inner vacuity, for something unusual and elevated. But Orlov very soon comes to detest her for this Turgenev-like, romantic, idealistic love, as he sarcastically calls it when describing to his boon compan-

ions the misfortune that has descended upon him. He grew to hate Zenaida Fyodorovna for installing herself in his rooms with the intention of living with him openly, as his wife.

In the meantime the "unknown man" is absorbed in his own emotions. The long-awaited moment, for the sake of which he had become Orlov's valet, arrived; while Orlov himself was away, his father, the outstanding statesman, comes to the apartment. The "unknown man" could not have hoped to find a more convenient moment for carrying out his plan. But it was too late. As he said of himself: "I could no longer squeeze the smallest drop of hatred out of my heart; I thought of the time, so recent, when I was such a passionate, stubborn, indefatigable enemy.... But it is hard to strike a match on a crumbling stone. The aged melancholy face and the cold glitter of the stars (on the official's frock-coat—*Author*) merely evoked in me cheap, petty and futile considerations as to the vanity of things worldly, of death, so soon to overtake him...."

And the "unknown man" discovered that there was nothing left of his former convictions and feelings, that there was not even hatred for the foe left in his soul. Now there was no reason for him to remain in the home of Orlov. And Zenaida Fyodorovna went with him away from this home, overcome by what Vladimir Ivanich had told her and what she had already begun to suspect—that Orlov was deceiving her basely. She discovered the ugliness and filth of the attitude of Orlov and his friends to her. She ran away from it all. In her utter loneliness Vladimir Ivanich was her only support. When he told her about himself it seemed to her that she had found deliverance. At last she was confronted by a man of principle, a true hero!

And it was then that Zenaida Fyodorovna showed what a remarkable woman she was. She could have borne her

grief if only she could have found a path to that *service of the idea* of which she dreamed. She is an idealist. Not for nothing is she compared—if only by Orlov and his friends in their jeering discussions—with Turgenev's women, with Yelena in *On the Eve*. Everything about her shows that she was capable of heroic deeds. And at last she had met a man of action, a man with ideals! He would set her in the right path, take her into the world of lofty thoughts, the world of struggle. She dreamed of the struggle as of the highest possible happiness, the only meaning of life. Her dreams were no mere abstractions—she quite consciously desired to participate in the fight against those conditions which had created people like Orlov, like the stepmother who had used her so cruelly. The grief she had undergone, the stories of his own past which Vladimir Ivanich related, her growing intimacy with a man who seemed to her a true warrior, all enriched her spiritually. When Vladimir Ivanich reproached her, as an intelligent, pure woman, for not having seen through Orlov: "Surely it wasn't so hard to see what he is! A sphinx, forsooth! Your sphinx is nothing but a drill sergeant!" she replied to these reproaches in shamefaced confusion:

" 'You mean you despise me for my past, and you are right,' she said, in violent agitation. 'You are one of those people who are set apart from the multitude and cannot be judged by ordinary standards; your moral demands are distinguished by extraordinary severity and I understand you cannot forgive; I understand you, and if I sometimes contradict you, it doesn't mean that I look at things differently from yourself. I only repeat the old rubbish because I haven't had time to wear out my old clothing and prejudices. I myself detest and despise my past, Orlov, my love for him.... Love! All that seems ridiculous to me now,' " she went on, going to the window and looking down on the canal. " 'This sort of love merely

dims the conscience and leads one astray. There is only one meaning in life—struggle. To smite the vile serpent's head with one's doubled fist, and smash it to smithereens! That is the meaning of life. There is no other, otherwise there is none at all....

" 'I can't help feeling that I have become ever so much wiser of late. The most extraordinary, original ideas come to me now. When I think of the past, of my former life, for instance—oh, and of people in general—everything merges into one image—my stepmother. Coarse, insolent, callous, false, depraved, and to crown all, a morphine-addict. My father was feeble and weak-willed, he married my mother for her money and drove her to consumption, but his second wife, my stepmother, he loved to distraction.... The things I had to endure! Oh, what's the use of talking! And now, as I say, everything has one face for me.... And I'm quite furious—why did my stepmother die? I'd like to come up against her now....'

" 'What for?'

" 'Oh, I don't know,' she replied with a laugh, tossing her head prettily. 'You get better. As soon as you've recovered we'll get our affairs going.... It's high time.' "

By "getting our affairs going," she meant: we'll go in for the cause of revolution, you will get me in touch with the fighters for freedom, who are struggling against all that which was identified for Zenaida Fyodorovna with the image of her stepmother, against the concentration of vulgarity, evil, callousness, lies, falsity, depravity. Life was a stepmother, humanity's cruel stepmother.

Zenaida Fyodorovna felt in herself a readiness for a real, serious struggle with life, the stepmother, she anticipated the pleasures of the fight, she was in a mood of lofty enthusiasm, close to the heroic, lofty mood of the heroine of Turgenev's prose poem *The Threshold*. Vladimir Ivanich was a teacher in her eyes, a man of action, of high ideals. She had no idea that he had become an or-

dinary man, thirsting for peace and "personal happiness." For Vladimir Ivanich had yielded to a base impulse: "I did not say a word of the change which had taken place in me." He concealed this change from her. Now he wanted only one thing—the love of Zenaida Fyodorovna. What a wretched thing was this love of his in comparison with her thirst to discover a lofty meaning in life, with the hopes she placed in Vladimir Ivanich! But it is impossible to conceal vacuity for long. There came a moment when Zenaida Fyodorovna divined the change that had taken place in Vladimir Ivanich. When she confronted him with the direct question: "What ought she to do?" he replied to her very much as the hero of *Dull Story* replied to the same question: "On my soul, Katya, I don't know.... Let's have breakfast, Katya...."

And Zenaida Fyodorovna appealed to her mentor and teacher with all Katya's grief and hope:

" '...Do let me put a straight question to you—what am I to do?'

" 'What are you to do?' I answered, shrugging my shoulders. 'One can't answer offhand a question like that!' "

The aged professor in *Dull Story* at least admitted, with sorrowful courage, his spiritual bankruptcy. Vladimir Ivanich hemmed and hawed and uttered commonplaces.

" 'Vladimir Ivanich,' she said, taking both my hands in hers. 'You have been through a great deal, you have felt much more than I have, you know ever so much more. Think seriously and tell me—what am I to do? Teach me. If you are no longer able yourself to go forward and take others with you, tell me, at least, where to go. After all, I'm a living, feeling, reasoning human being, you know....'

" 'A window is not the only source of light. There are others as well as I, Zenaida Fyodorovna.'

" 'Show me them, then,' she said eagerly. 'That's just what I'm asking you.'

" 'And another thing,' I continued. 'There are more ways than one of serving one's ideals. If one is mistaken, loses one's faith in one direction, another can be looked for. The world of ideals is broad and boundless.'

" 'The world of ideals,' she repeated, casting a mocking glance at me. 'Well, no use going on . . . what's the good?'

"She flushed.

" 'The world of ideals!' she echoed . . . and a look of indignation and disgust was expressed in her face. 'All your wonderful ideals come to one inevitable, essential step—I must become your mistress. That's what is required. To parade one's ideals and yet refuse to be the mistress of a highly honourable, idealistic individual, means not to understand ideals. We must begin with that—first become a mistress, and the rest will follow.

" 'Why didn't you tell me at once what the ideals were which made you drag me away from Petersburg, then I should have known. I would have taken poison then, when I wanted to, and this wretched farce would have been avoided. Oh, what's the good of talking?' She raised her hand in a gesture of despair.

" 'You abused Orlov,' she said, smiting the table with the palm of her hand, 'but in your heart you are just the same. Not for nothing does he despise all those theories.'

" 'He does not despise them, he fears them,' I shouted. 'He's a liar and a coward.'

" 'Very well, then. He's a coward, and a liar, and he deceived me—and what are you? Excuse my frankness—what are you? He deceived me and left me to my fate in Petersburg, and you deceived me and abandoned me here. But at least he did not mix up his deception with ideals, and you. . . .'

" 'For God's sake, what are you saying?' I exclaimed in horror, wringing my hands and striding hastily up to

her. 'Why, Zenaida Fyodorovna, this is utter cynicism, you mustn't give way to despair—hear me out. . . .' " And he goes on to speak of man's vocation, of "selfless love for one's neighbour." But he himself feels the bottomless triviality of his words: "A note of insincerity suddenly sounded in my voice, and I was abashed."

" 'I want to live!' I exclaimed with genuine feeling."

From disingenuous triviality he had gone over to sincere triviality. But triviality is always triviality, that same stifling, murderous triviality, true to itself in all its aspects, which had tortured Zenaida Fyodorovna all her life and ended by driving her to her grave. She took poison; it was only a matter of a certain delay—she poisoned herself not after the deception of Orlov, but after the deception of Vladimir Ivanich. The ruthlessness of the writer shows itself in the sentence, so sternly implicit in the story—Chekhov placed both men on the same level. If anything, Orlov was "better" than Vladimir Ivanich. The latter concealed his vacuity with high-flown talk of the lofty world of ideals. He it was who brought about the spiritual downfall of Zenaida Fyodorovna, who destroyed her confidence in the world of ideals—and what more dastardly crime could there be? And between them the two men murdered a young, pure woman, whose only fault was that she loved, that she wanted a pure, spiritual life. What could be more devastating? Much has been said by former critics of Chekhov's "gentleness." The flabby, spiritually bankrupt intellectuals of every sort of liberal persuasion would have liked to hail Chekhov as a brother, to see in him a kindly old nurse with pince-nez hanging from a cord round his neck, spoon-feeding Professor Serebryakov with herb-tea, that herb-tea to which Filosofov, a representative of the liberal-cum-clerical clique of vulgarians, compared the work of Chekhov. Certainly Chekhov's style was subdued, calm, impartial, meditative. But is not each just, bitter word which Zenaida

Fyodorovna casts in the teeth of Vladimir Ivanich equivalent to a blow?

There would seem to be no grounds to speak of satire in *The Story of an Unknown Man.* But Chekhov's satire is to be found by reading between the lines. The mournful tragicomedy of human relations, the breach between the ideal and reality, the unexpected analogies, the identifying of things which would seem to be mutually exclusive, e.g., making Orlov and the "unknown man" accomplices in the crime against ethics, this mournful human comedy is what fascinates Chekhov. Very often it is the breach between words and actions, the ideal and the actual, between the conceptions formed by people and reality, which serves as the source of Chekhov's satire. And the satirical leit-motif is not infrequently tinged with a mournful smile.

"You are an idealist, and ought only to serve your ideals," Zenaida Fyodorovna says to Orlov.

"You are one of those people who are set apart from the multitude and cannot be judged by ordinary standards; your moral demands are distinguished by extraordinary severity," Zenaida Fyodorovna tells Vladimir Ivanich.

The mournfully satirical comic streak is to be traced in the striking difference between Zenaida Fyodorovna's conception of people and the essential nature of these people. But there is an infinitely deeper comic satire in the fact that this conception applies equally both to Orlov and Vladimir Ivanich, so diametrically opposed on the surface. If the enthusiasm for both men had been expressed by some frivolous lady for her "idols," the comic satire would have remained comic satire and nothing more. But it comes from an intelligent woman with a deep nature, in search of a pure, spiritual life, and the fact that the two men were identical, that her mistake was repeated in a new, unexpected aspect, that it fell to

her to make the same mistake twice in her lifetime, introduces an element of tragedy. Thus the tragic and the comic satire are merged. The inherent likeness between the two men makes the sentence one of the utmost severity, ruthlessness and irony, a sentence which applies to all such "masters of minds" as Vladimir Ivanich, who says of himself: "What I want is to play a conspicuous, independent, lofty role, to make history," but who, when tested, turns out to be nothing but a futile chatterer. Such people want "to make history." But history is not made by solitary individuals.

After the words of Vladimir Ivanich: "A window is not the only source of light. There are others as well as I," Zenaida Fyodorovna begs him with a fresh access of hope to show her these people, to get her in touch with them. Vladimir Ivanich passes over this, her last appeal to him, in silence, changing the subject. There was no one for him to show her, all whom he could show were mere featherweights....

A review of *The Story of an Unknown Man* by Batyushkov contains the noteworthy criticism:

"The tragedy of Orlov's position (erroneous, the reviewer is referring to Vladimir Ivanich—*Author*) is that he doubts the usefulness of his act (act of terror—*Author*) when the abyss of human triviality is revealed to him, and he senses a new, more terrible and immense foe, a foe supported by the entire existing order of things. What is wanted is not isolated conspiratorial action, but mass protest, a united stand against the common evil."

Batyushkov was wrong in ascribing these conclusions, which are implicit in *The Story of an Unknown Man*, to the hero of the story, who had quite thrown up the struggle and was not in the least concerned about "a united stand against the common evil." If he had been staunch in his convictions, Zenaida Fyodorovna would never have gone out of life. But the very fact that it

was possible for a man like Batyushkov, an average intellectual, one whose views, though more or less democratic, were far from Marxist, to speak of the coming crash, of the futility of *isolated acts*, of the necessity for *mass protest*, a united *stand against the common evil*—the very fact that such an interpretation of Chekhov's work could be suggested, is in itself highly characteristic of the times, is, indeed, a product of the times. The masses were entering the arena of conscious historical action, the conscious creation of history, and all those whose ears were not, as were those of the "man in the shell," stuffed with cotton wool, could hear their footsteps, could sense something new encroaching upon life.

In *The Black Monk* (1894), Chekhov described with the utmost precision the megalomania which overtook a mediocre scientist who wrecked his nerves by overwork. When he was asked why he had written this story, Chekhov simply said, referring to the bare outlines of the story, that he had "taken a fancy" to describe a case of megalomania. But there is in the story, apart from meticulous observations on mental disease, a profound poetical undercurrent.

Doctor of Philosophy Kovrin no longer lived in the present, but in dreams and visions. He was a prey to hallucinations, being visited by a ghost, who came and went——a black monk with a shrewd, kindly countenance. That Black Monk is a shrewd flatterer. If we lend an attentive ear to his words we shall see that Kovrin was not the only one to be seduced by this spirit.... What did the Black Monk, who called himself "product of Kovrin's feverish imagination," whisper to him, the Black Monk, who never pretended to be anything but a spectre? He did, it is true, make use of sophisms in which the doctor of philosophy was well versed. "I exist in your imagination, but your imagination is itself a part of nature, so that I do exist in nature." And Kovrin

both believed and did not believe in the reality of his illusion.

"You are one of the few who are entitled to call themselves the chosen of the gods," said the tempter. "You serve eternal truth. . . . But for people like you, who serve the cause, who live in full consciousness and freedom, humanity would be nothing. It would have developed according to the laws of nature, simply waiting passively for the end of its earthly history to come. You are leading it a few thousand years in advance, to the kingdom of eternal truth, and in this lies your lofty services."

Kovrin is somewhat perturbed by the thought that the Black Monk is a mere figment of his brain.

" 'Does this mean that I am mentally unsound, abnormal?'

" 'What if it does? Why let that worry you? You are ill because you have overtaxed your powers and are exhausted, but this only means that you have sacrificed your health for the idea, and the time is soon coming when you will give your life itself for it. . . . This is what all gifted and noble natures aspire to.'

" 'If I know myself to be insane how am I to believe my senses?'

" 'How do you know that all those geniuses in whom the world believes did not see visions, too? The scientists now say that genius is akin to madness. Only mediocre individuals, mere members of the herd, are healthy and normal, my friend. All these ideas about the nervous era, overexhaustion, degeneration, and so on, can only seriously worry those whose aim in life goes no further than the present, that is to say, the common herd.'

" 'The ancient Romans said: *mens sana in corpore sano.*'

" 'All is not truth that the Romans or Greeks said. Exaltation, enthusiasm, ecstasy—everything that distinguishes prophets, poets, and martyrs to the cause of their

ideals, from ordinary mortals, is repellent to the carnal instinct in man, that is to say, the part of him which is concerned in his physical well-being. I repeat: if you wish to be healthy and normal, join the herd.'

" 'It is strange that you should echo the very thoughts that come into my head so frequently,' said Kovrin. 'You seem to have seen into my mind, to have heard my most secret thoughts. . . .'

"He went back to the house in high spirits, feeling elated. The few words the Black Monk had said to him flattered not so much his vanity, as his very soul, his whole being. To be one of the elect, to serve eternal truth, to belong to the ranks of those who would make humanity worthy of the Kingdom of God a few thousand years earlier than it might have been but for them, in other words, to exempt human nature from several thousand years of struggle, sin and suffering, to sacrifice to the idea his youth, strength and health, to be ready to die for the general good—what a lofty, happy lot! He went back over his past in his mind—he remembered what he had learned, and what he had himself taught others, and came to the conclusion that there had been no exaggeration in the words of the Black Monk. . . ."

Those around Kovrin strengthened his belief in his vocation. When he pays court to Tanya, she says to him: "We are insignificant people, but you are a great man." Tanya herself (who bears a great likeness to Sonya in *Uncle Vanya*) and her father, a master gardener, the creator of a rare and wonderful garden, both treat Kovrin as one of the elect. They might have addressed him in precisely the same words which Zenaida Fyodorovna (in *The Story of an Unknown Man*) uses in speaking to Vladimir Ivanich: "You are one of those people who are set apart from the multitude and cannot be judged by ordinary standards. . . ." Father and daughter worship Doctor of Philosophy Kovrin just as Sonya and Uncle Vanya

worshipped that other Chosen One, Professor Serebryakov, and, like them, wrecked their lives in the name of their idol.

This Black Monk came from somewhere in Syria or Arabia, a thousand years ago, and one only needs to listen carefully to his words to realize that he repeats in solemn, exalted form, all the ideas then fashionable among the intelligentsia, and so widely spread in the seventies and eighties, and even in the nineties—here we have the "superman and the mob," "the elect and the mob," "the martyrdom of the elect," the conception of the intellectuals as a special caste of "servants of the higher principles," prophets, sages and poets, called upon, like Messiah, to lead the "herd" of common humanity to "the kingdom of eternal truth"; here also is the then fashionable notion of the closeness of genius to madness, and so on, and so on. No wonder Kovrin thinks the Black Monk had seen into his mind, heard his most secret thoughts, no wonder the words of the Black Monk flattered his very soul, his very being. The point is that the Black Monk really did see into the mind, hear the secret thoughts of the "second-rate intellectual of the day," as Gorky called his own Klim Ivanovich Samgin.

Everything said by the Black Monk is a jumble of fashionable conceptions, ideas, so typical of the many Kovrins, of the whole intelligentsia, who considered themselves chosen ones, called upon to make happy, with their divine reason, the "common herd." No wonder the words of the Black Monk remind Kovrin of all that he had himself learned and himself taught others, all that was written in the books, pamphlets, articles of the day, all that was uttered from the seats of learning.

The unnatural exaltation and ecstasy in which the mentally unsound Kovrin lived and moved comes to a mournful and tragic end. What keen, grim humour there is in the contrast between the state of (false) inspiration, the

elation glorifying his life during the period in which he believed in his own greatness, and the prosaic existence of a perfectly ordinary man, such a painful anticlimax to the period of ecstasy! Kovrin now had to destroy, to tear up, his dissertation and all the articles written by him in his period of false, morbid inspiration, for "in every line he could read strange, perfectly baseless claims, reckless defiance, insolence, megalomania, which made him feel as if he were reading a catalogue of his own sins."

And it is in very truth a "catalogue of the sins," the case-history, not only of Kovrin, but of the greater part of the intelligentsia of the day.

During the period of Kovrin's morbid exaltation, when he was occasionally haunted by the idea that he was the victim of hallucination, a sick man, he would console himself with the thought: "But after all, it makes me happy, and I am doing no harm to anyone. Therefore there is nothing evil in my hallucinations...." But the retreat from reality can never be harmless, can never be indulged in with impunity. Kovrin did much harm, wrought much evil. He wrecked the lives of two good, honourable people, two people who were creative—in *fact*, and not merely in dreams—worthy, modest individuals, loving the cause they worked for more than they loved themselves, as the old lover of gardens, Tanya's father, put it. Kovrin's madness was merely an extreme case of egocentrism. He was the cause of the illness and death of the old man who worshipped him, and of Tanya, who trustingly sacrificed her whole life to him; he wrecked the lives of the only people in the whole world who loved him as if he were one of their family. He ruined a marvellous garden. He ruined love, friendship, the beauty of life. There is profound poetical significance in this story. The false beauty of dreams, leading away from reality, is not harmless, as Kovrin thought, but criminal, disgraceful, for it kills the

true beauty—the beauty of life, true and not pseudo-beauty. And Kovrin himself perishes. Dying, he called for the lost Tanya, and for the whole beauty of life which had gone with her.

"He called for Tanya, for the great garden and its luxuriant dew-besprinkled flowers, for the park, the pine-trees with their rugged roots, the rye-field, for his beloved science, for youth, courage, joy and for life, which had been so good." His mania returns, once more he believes himself to be the chosen of the Lord. Dying, he calls to his dream, unconscious that it was this that had killed them all—Tanya, the luxuriant garden with the dew-besprinkled flowers, lost youth, joy and life, glorious life. And he called for all that which he had himself killed.

Why did Chekhov make Kovrin return to his morbid state on his death-bed, and recover, together with his sickness, his feelings of bliss? Kovrin "could see a great pool of blood on the floor just beside his face and was too weak to utter a single word, but ineffable, boundless joy filled his whole being. Outside, a serenade was being played beneath the balcony, and the Black Monk whispered to him that he was a genius and that he was only dying because his weak human body had lost its balance and could no longer serve as an envelope for his genius.

"When Varvara Nikolayevna woke and came out from behind the screen, Kovrin lay dead, with a blissful smile frozen on his lips."

Does not such an ending imply that the author himself did not know which was better: a life of false beautiful dreams, or real life, drab, tedious, mediocre, "without divinity, without inspiration"—the life which began for Kovrin when he went in for a course of bromide and milk? And yet it is not Chekhov, but Kovrin who raises this problem, solving it in favour of the false dreams. For Chekhov, for whom life, on the one hand, real life, life as

it is, with the grief and suffering and all that life contains, *does* exist, there is nevertheless also the garden with the beautiful flowers, and life itself is capable of becoming such a garden; on the other hand, there are the dreams which lead away from this real life, and can only, therefore, wreck beauty and life. The happiness enjoyed by Kovrin on his death-bed, the blissful smile frozen on his dead countenance, belong to disease, to death, not to life.

There is yet another work by Chekhov (*The Sea-gull*) in which the conception of one of the main characters, whose dreams bear him away from reality, is saturated with the idea of death. Konstantin Treplev mused: "Life must be shown not as it is and not as it should be, but as it seems to be in dreams." Treplev retreated into dreams, far from real life, and this ruined him. Life takes its revenge. The dreams of both Kovrin and Treplev, the words of the Black Monk, contain obvious echoes of those decadent theories which Chekhov treated so ironically. The death of Kovrin and Treplev is the death of false aspirations.

In *The Black Monk*, Chekhov the doctor is merged with extraordinary completeness in Chekhov the artist. The whole story castigates disease and affirms the simple, true beauty of life, and health—physical, moral, mental, spiritual health. The whole story emphasizes the ugliness, the deformity of disease, exalted as something lofty, as a sign of distinction, of false beauty glorified by the morbid art of decadence.

Thus Chekhov follows and develops the tradition of Russian literary realism, profoundly alien to all false, morbid dreaming. Realism means faithfulness to life and to the truth of life, and Chekhov's realism contains within it hostility to false ideas leading away from life. Chekhov was convinced that the idea of Messianic mission, of Chosen Ones was pretentious and unnatural. He was convinced that what Russia needed was not prophets but

men of action, studying reality as it *is*, honestly and resolutely, seeking, together with the rest of humanity, a way to change reality, to make it what it *ought* to be. In the theories of Chosen Ones, of "exceptional" individuals, towering above the common herd, Chekhov, with the meditative, mournful smile of the satirist, saw nothing but megalomania.

Chekhov challenges his readers, the Russian intellectuals, to strive for the utmost improvement of actual conditions, and not to be content with this, to search resolutely, not sparing themselves, for what is new, to appraise soberly the limited, inadequate nature of their own efforts; not to entertain themselves with false dreams, including the dreams of themselves as the Elect, not to give up when faced by failure, not to sink by the way and yield to exhaustion, never to give up the search, never to fall back upon the commonplace. His position as the poet of the "little man," the rank and file, ordinary folk, determined his ironical attitude to those who would raise themselves above "ordinary" people. All this sort of thing seemed to him arrogant and pretentious.

The proneness to "fall by the way," to yield to exhaustion, to fall back in relief upon commonplace ways of life, "fragility," lack of stamina—all these features are emphasized by Chekhov as characteristic of the various types of leaders advanced by the intelligentsia of the day.

"...Why do we tire so easily?" asks the "unknown man" in a letter to Orlov. "Why are we—at first so eager, daring, generous, full of faith—spiritual bankrupts by the time we are thirty or thirty-five years old? Why should one be dying of consumption, another put a bullet in his brain, a third seek oblivion in vodka and gambling, and yet another, in order to drown his fear and misery, trample underfoot with utter cynicism the image of his own pure, beautiful youth? Why, having once fallen, do we

no longer strive to rise again, and, having lost one thing, no longer seek for another? Why?"

The "unknown man" does not know how to explain the ease with which a certain category of "heroes" falls. But he thinks he can explain the cause of his own fall.

"It is not hard to explain why I weakened and fell prematurely. I was like Samson, who carried the gates of Gaza on his shoulders, to bear them to the top of the mountain, and it was only when I was overcome by fatigue, when my youth and health were finally spent, that I realized that these gates were too heavy for me, and that I had deceived myself... my reminiscences are a burden to me, and my conscience is always trying to shun them."

In the play *Ivanov* (1887), Chekhov comes to grips with this theme.

The bitter reflections of Ivanov, summing up his former social activities, coincide with those of the "unknown man." Speaking to Lebedev, the father of Sasha, Ivanov's fiancée, Ivanov says, a few minutes before he commits suicide:

"Now listen, old man.... I have no intention of explaining to you whether I'm honourable or base, healthy or insane. You wouldn't understand. I was once young, eager, sincere, intelligent; I loved, hated, believed not as others did, worked and hoped nineteen to the dozen, battled with windmills, knocked my head against a stone wall. Regardless of my own powers, unthinking, ignorant of life, I shouldered a burden which broke my back and strained my sinews; I hastened to expend my all in the time of my youth, drank, enthused, toiled—all to excess. And how could it have been otherwise, I ask you? There are so few of us, and there is so much work to do. God, how much! And see how cruelly life, the life against which I contended, is revenging itself on me! I have utterly strained myself. At the age of thirty—the aftermath. I

am old, I go about in a dressing-gown. I roam amongst men with a heavy head, inert, exhausted, broken, without faith, without love, aimless as a shadow, and I do not know who I am, what I live for, what I want. It even seems to me that love is nonsense, that caresses are insipid, that there is no sense in work, that songs and ardent words are old and vapid. And everywhere I carry about with me my melancholy, my cold boredom, my dissatisfaction, my disgust with life. I have perished irreparably. You see before you a man exhausted, disillusioned at thirty-five, crushed by his own infinitesimal achievements. He burns with shame, mocks at his own weakness. . . ."

Both Vladimir Ivanich, the hero of *The Story of an Unknown Man*, and Ivanov wore themselves out by their infinitesimal feats, infinitesimal because the light from one small window cannot possibly light up a huge garden. Ivanov says to Dr. Lvov: "You graduated only last year, my dear fellow, you are still young and energetic, and I am thirty-five. I have the right to advise you—arrange your whole life according to accepted patterns. The more drab and monotonous the background, the better. Don't try and fight single-handed against thousands, old man, don't fight windmills, don't beat your head against a stone wall. . . . Retreat into your shell and do the little job that the Lord has given you to do. . . . That's the only snug, honest, healthy way. As for the life that fell to my lot—what could be more exhausting? How many errors, wrongs, absurdities there have been!"

We see a likeness between Ivanov and Vladimir Ivanich. Both wore themselves out, both felt shame and remorse when summing up their past activities and admitting their futility, both came, by different ways, to the conclusion that capitulation was inevitable. Whatever the difference in their theoretical, political standpoints—one, an ex-terrorist, the other an *Exkulturträger* from the ranks of the intelligentsia—they were alike in that both carried

on their activities, as Ivanov said, "in isolation," and therefore ended in spiritual bankruptcy. "There are so few of us!" exclaims Ivanov. But that was just the trouble—social workers like Ivanov and Vladimir Ivanich neither possessed the ability to direct their activities so as to rally greater numbers of fighters for what was new in life, nor realized the necessity for this. Neither the Ivanovs nor the Vladimir Ivaniches had the slightest knowledge or understanding of the people. The very name of the hero* of the play shows the author's desire to create a figure which should be typical of a certain section of intellectuals whose activities came to grief in the face of the demands of actuality.

The fact that *Ivanov* was to a certain extent the author's own pronouncement on the old type of representatives of the liberal and popular tendencies of the eighties, is clearly shown in Chekhov's interesting letter to Suvorin about this play (Dec. 30, 1888). In this letter Chekhov touches on his constant theme—the rapid "exhaustion," the rapid transit of intellectuals from excitement to disillusionment and apathy:

"... In a fit of enthusiasm a man who has only just left the classroom undertakes a burden beyond his strength, takes up a school, the peasant question, rational farming, and *Vestnik Yevropy*, all in one breath, speechifies, writes to the ministry, fights the evil, applauds the good; if he falls in love it must absolutely be with some bluestocking or neurotic ... if not a prostitute whom he saves, and so on, and so on.... But hardly does he reach the age of thirty or thirty-five when he begins to feel exhaustion and boredom. His moustache has hardly reached its full development, but he declares with authority: 'Don't get married, old man ... profit by my experience.' Or: 'What

* Ivanov may be considered as equivalent to Johnson or Jones; it is one of the commonest Russian names.—*Tr.*

is liberalism, after all? Between you and me, Katkov was often right.' "

It must be borne in mind that the word *liberalism* had very wide application in those times, covering every form of opposition. While castigating the typical arguments of the liberal of yesterday, who today criticizes liberalism and even admits that Katkov, that Black-Hundred journalist and renegade, "was often right," Chekhov castigates the renegade tendencies so widespread amidst the intellectuals of the eighties. The letter just quoted shows that Chekhov understood the spiritual bankruptcy of the old political groups of his day, and grieved, not knowing where to seek great ideals and real people capable of helping the native land. "Take the present day," writes Anton Pavlovich. "Socialism is just one form of excitement. Where is it to be found? In Tikhomirov's letter to the Tsar. The socialists have settled down with wives and are now criticizing the Zemstvo. Where is liberalism? Mikhailovsky himself admits that the chessmen are all mixed up nowadays. . . ."

The volte-face of Tikhomirov was no chance, isolated act of treachery, it was one of the aspects of the ideological and political downfall of the old Narodnik movement, with its struggle against tsarism by solitary intellectuals out of contact with the people, and its individual acts of political terror. The very name Lev Tikhomirov acquired a satirical symbolic significance—Lev standing for "lion," and the surname (Tikhomirov) coming from the words "quiet and peace," the combination expressing the thirst for a quiet peaceful life, for that reconciliation with actuality felt by Vladimir Ivanich after his withdrawal from terrorist activities.

"The socialists have settled down with wives and are now criticizing the Zemstvo"—this phrase from Chekhov's letter refers to the Narodniks of the eighties now degenerated into mere bourgeois individuals. Ivanov's suicide

symbolized the bankruptcy of the various liberal tendencies rife in the eighties.

It was precisely Chekhov's attitude to the liberal tendencies of his day, and the political scepticism that showed itself in him during the eighties which Suvorin did his best to exploit, endeavouring to lead Chekhov away from the search for the new, from his anxieties and alarms. The liberals were a bad lot, all the pawns had got mixed up, so better support the conservatives, at least they are not vague! Such was the logic of the editor of the corrupt *Novoye Vremya*. But this attempt of Suvorin to get Chekhov on his side in politics was unsuccessful, too. "You say there can be nothing more contemptible than our liberal opposition," writes Chekhov to Suvorin (1889). "Well, and what about those who do not belong to the opposition? Are they any better? The mother of all Russian ills is crass ignorance, and it is equally characteristic of all parties and tendencies." In the stories *The Name-day*, *On the Estate*, Chekhov drew portraits of "those who do not belong to the opposition," conservatives, reactionary landowners. All Chekhov's writing was a struggle against the Prishibeyev and Belikov elements. And he criticized the various Ivanovs, the heroes of "dull stories," the "unknown men," for their weakness, their lack of earnestness, of stamina, their retreat from the quest of new great aims and ideals. And this is why the reactionary-cum-liberal doctrine of "life for life's sake," in which "all the pawns" really were mixed up, so that it had become impossible to distinguish the liberal from the reactionary, evoked such a scornful and wrathful response in him. And this is why the interpretation given by Suvorin in his review of *Ivanov*, to the effect that the author of the play himself "seemed to be desirous of saying that one ought to live simply, like everyone else, and put one's best intentions into the development of this simple, ordinary life, not wasting them on impossible

feats, on vain efforts to set the ocean on fire," could never be accepted by Chekhov. In his review Suvorin expounds that very theory of "life for life's sake" which brought from Chekhov his rebuke. And as if in confirmation of his idea that anyone who gives up the search for lofty spiritual aims has nothing left but to eat, drink and sleep, or "run his head against the corner of a chest," Chekhov makes Ivanov commit suicide. This suicide is the culmination of Ivanov's spiritual catastrophe—"having fallen once," as the "unknown man" writes in a letter, he is unable to rise again, "having lost one thing," he does not seek another, is incapable of doing so. And to "live for life's sake" is not enough for him.

"IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO GO ON LIKE THIS"

In the innumerable books about Chekhov the same line of thought is followed—Chekhov is said to have travelled, ideologically speaking, from *Novoye Vremya* to the liberalism of *Russkaya Mysl* and *Russkiye Vedomosti.* The biographical sketches on Anton Pavlovich which appeared in the years 1934 and 1939, and the preface to the *Collected Works* published in 1931, are all based on this erroneous theory of the "evolution of the writer's outlook." Exaggerating certain vulgar "Taganrog" prejudices picked up by the youthful Chekhov, which never had any real influence on his writing, the biographers have created a legend of Chekhov's *Novoye Vremya* tendencies, which he is supposed to have gradually overcome, until he developed into a good little liberal.

It would be useless to deny that the break with *Novoye Vremya* and the publishing of his works only in the liberal press had a great and beneficial influence on the development of Chekhov's outlook, and revealed his inward struggle against political scepticism and non-political proclivities.

But just as the fact that Chekhov contributed to *Novoye Vremya* does not mean he shared the ideological tendencies of the paper (he placed in *Novoye Vremya* the story *Gusyev*, so permeated with the spirit of protest against the outrageous reactionary regime, which is sufficient proof that he did not), his contributing to liberal publica-

tions did not signify that Chekhov was an advocate of liberalism in his writing. His attitude to liberalism is expressed in the formula we find in his notebooks, a formula which can bear comparison, in its neatness and devastating expressiveness, with the epigrams of Shchedrin: "Moderate liberalism—a dog needs freedom, but must be kept on a chain." This formula is a complete summary of the essence of that very Cadet party and its forerunners with which Chekhov's biographers choose to connect him.

"It is impossible to go on like this!"—such was Chekhov's mood towards the end of the nineties, expressed in the words of Ivan Ivanich, the vet, in whose person the story *Gooseberries* (1898) is told. The liberal theory of the gradual improvement of conditions by means of isolated patchwork reform was greeted by Chekhov with increasing scorn. Ivan Ivanich explodes his own former liberal views of gradual improvement.

"'...Freedom is a blessing, I have said, one can't get on without it, any more than without air, but we must wait. Yes, that is what I said, and now I ask: 'In the name of what must we wait?' Here Ivan Ivanich looked angrily at Burkin. 'In the name of what must we wait, I ask you. What is there to be considered? Don't be in such a hurry, they tell me, every idea materializes gradually, in its own time. But who are they who say this? What is the proof that it is just? You refer to the natural order of things, to the logic of facts, but according to what order, what logic do I, a living, thinking individual, stand on the edge of a ditch and wait for it to be gradually filled up, or choked with sand, when I might leap over it or build a bridge across it? And again, in the name of what must we wait? Wait, when we have not the strength to live, though live we must and to live we desire!'"

Chekhov begins to approach the idea not through evolution, but through the resolute, fundamental change of

conditions—such is the underlying significance of the words about "leaping over the ditch."

With his keen intuition he detects the falseness of liberalism, the hypocrisy beneath the mask of love of the people, progress, and all that.

"They are decent, cultured folk, but there's something or other they have lied about"—this description of the liberals is to be found among Chekhov's rough notes. In his diary for the year 1897 Anton Pavlovich writes of the liberals as follows:

"Feb. 19th. Dinner at the Continental in memory of the Great Reform.* Boring and absurd. To eat, drink champagne, chatter, utter speeches about the people's self-awareness, conscience, freedom, etc., while slaves in frock-coats, those very same serfs, are hovering around us, while coachmen are waiting outside in the frost, is to deny the Holy Ghost."

How much scorn for liberal self-indulgence there is in these words!

Nor, as we have seen, could the Narodniks of the eighties and nineties, now become so bourgeois, in their endeavours to hold back, to stem the inexorable course of history, have attractions for Chekhov. The popular leaders were for him people like his own "man in a shell," timidly trying to hide from real life, to conceal their vacuity behind the halo of the ideas of the sixties, to give themselves out as the preservers of great traditions.

In his cycle of peasant stories (*The Muzhiks, In the Gully, The New Country-house*), Anton Pavlovich seems to be testing the Narodnik theories as to the possibility for Russia to skip the capitalist path to development, since the pillars of the peasant communities are powerful in the village, and "kulak" oppression may be avoided with the aid of craft artels and other "hopeful phenomena." In his

* February 19th, the day of the signing of the manifesto for the so-called "liberation of the peasants from serfdom" (1861).—*Ed.*

peasant stories Chekhov tells the truth about the countryside at that time. In this light his stories amount to works of research, as essential for those "devoting themselves to the study of life as the stars are for astronomers." Chekhov painted a harsh picture of kulak oppression, and exposed the utter collapse of the "pillars" of the peasant communities. The facetious nickname "Little Use" given in childhood to the hero of *My Life* (1896) becomes a kind of ironical leit-motif, directed against all hair-splitting, against every aspect of adaptation to conditions, rather than alteration of them.

The story is told in the first person. The hero and his wife made an experiment in Tolstoian "simplification," going "back to the land," to physical toil, rejecting the benefits of urban civilization, and so on. And this is how the wife sums it all up:

"Ignorance, filth, drunkenness, incredibly high infant mortality—everything remains as it used to be, and has become no better because you plough the land and I spend money and read books. Evidently we have only been working for ourselves, thinking on such broad lines for ourselves.... Other ways of struggle, powerful, bold, immediate, are required. If you really want to be of use, come out of the cramped circle of ordinary activities and try to act directly on the masses."

True, in her endeavours to define her ideas as to the necessity of "acting directly on the masses," the wife can think of no other ways but through art. But for all that, Chekhov's aspirations towards the discovery of rapid resolute methods for the fundamental alteration of existing conditions, make themselves felt in her bold guesses.

In the formula contained in a letter to Pleshcheyev: "I am neither a liberal nor a conservative, an advocate of 'gradual progress,' a monk, nor a 'neutral,'" Anton Pavlovich might have added: neither a Tolstoian nor a Narodnik.

This self-appraisal, to be found in the letter to Pleshcheyev, is interpreted by Chekhov's biographers to mean that Chekhov, forsooth, confirms his "nonconformity to all parties, his deliberate unconcern with politics." Such biographers base their conclusions on the fact that, in this letter to Pleshcheyev, after all the neithers (neither a liberal nor a conservative, etc.), Anton Pavlovich adds that he only wants to be a free artist, nothing more. By such reasoning, the biographers enter into argument with Chekhov himself, who declared that he was not a "neutral."

If it is borne in mind that the letter to Pleshcheyev dates from that very year 1889 in which *Dull Story* was written, that is to say just when Chekhov's longing for a clear social outlook had reached its highest point, it will not be hard to understand that Anton Pavlovich could never have used the words "free artist" in the sense of "freedom" from social-political ideals, which his biographers impose upon them.

Chekhov could never have considered a "free artist" as "free" from having an outlook on life. Such "freedom" would have been the worst kind of slavery for Anton Pavlovich. To be a "free artist" meant for him freedom from the worship of dogma and schemes, from conservative, timid thinking, from any sort of "shell," from all prejudice, from the fear of life and the truth of life, freedom from fear of the new, freedom from religion, from middle-class vulgarity, from proprietary sentiments, from triviality, from the power of the past, freedom from *idols* and *ideals*, from all secondary considerations interfering with the chief aim of the artist: truth to art and truth to life. And he was approaching such freedom all the time.

Chekhov was free from those subjective schemes, from reactionary Utopian ideas threatening to run counter to the course of life itself. His work held predictions of the future.

"I HAVE BELIEVED IN PROGRESS SINCE MY CHILDHOOD"

The XIXth century was a century of spectacular scientific discoveries and inventions, and yet not a single great writer has brought himself to describe the progress of science and technique in bourgeois society. The poetry and beauty of this progress were lost on writers. They realized—some vaguely, others more clearly—that the triumphs of bourgeois civilization are achieved at the price of suffering and the destruction of millions of human lives, that the achievements of science serve to enrich the "masters of the world," that the great discoveries and inventions have become, in the hands of the masters of the bourgeois world, means for the exploitation and the destruction of human beings. The artists came to the mournful conclusion that science was an instrument of the Evil One.

The bourgeois period of history, says Karl Marx, is called upon to create a material basis for the new world. Only when the great social revolution has mastered the achievements of the bourgeois epoch ... will human progress cease to resemble the atrocious heathen idol which would only drink nectar from the skull of a murdered man.

Artists had no desire to drink the nectar of civilization from the skulls of the millions killed off by capitalism, and were therefore unable to find a source of poetry in

the progressive revolutions being accomplished before their eyes in all branches of science and technique. If a writer ventured to describe the achievements of bourgeois civilization from a sympathetic angle, he risked being taken for an apologist or advocate of the bourgeois system. It was only third-rate writers who could afford this. Not one of the great writers could bear the idea of becoming "devil's advocate." Such was the tragic position of the artist in bourgeois society. In his book on the problem of the novel, Ralph Fox, the English Communist writer, has described the situation with great penetration.

Only those artists and thinkers who were connected with the great revolutionary movements, or who at least shared the advanced, progressive aspirations of their epoch, could divine, by sheer force of genius, that though the "masters of the world" were as yet reaping the advantages of progress, in the long run it was the masses which would benefit. Closest of all to such a comprehension came the brilliant Russian revolutionary democrats —Belinsky, Chernyshevsky, Nekrasov and Shchedrin.

Chekhov neither understood the historical role of the working class, nor was in any way connected with the growing revolutionary movement of his epoch.

And yet the achievements of science, the progress of civilization, could not fail to rouse his sympathy and admiration, for he was a true representative of the democratic, creative, progressive intellectuals. His withdrawal from the influence of Tolstoian doctrines was caused chiefly by his inability to reconcile himself to the rejection of civilization which formed their basis. Speaking of the time when he was to a certain extent under the influence of Tolstoi's ideas, Chekhov wrote (in 1894):

"Tolstoi's moralizing does not move me any more, in the depth of my heart I am hostile to it.... I have peasant blood in my veins, and nobody can tell me anything about peasant virtues. I have believed in progress since

my childhood.... Common sense and justice tell me that there is more love for humanity in electric and steam power than in celibacy and abstaining from eating meat...."

Anton Pavlovich eagerly watched the progress of scientific thought, approving all that was advanced and progressive in its development. He studied Darwin with gusto. ("What a delightful writer!" he was once heard to say of Darwin). Any sort of reactionary campaign against science and progress met his severe disapprobation.

His extraordinary social instinct displayed itself in the fact that, while admiring the achievements of the civilization of his day, he was at the same time profoundly hostile to any reconciliation with bourgeois conditions, and despised the bourgeois theories of progress.

The bourgeois "progressives" maintained that the power of science and technique would gradually—on the basis of bourgeois society, be it understood—create the "possibility of a tolerable existence, and even comfort for all."

But Chekhov denied any such possibility. The principal character of his long story *My Life* (told in the first person) expresses the author's point of view in an argument with Dr. Blagovo, a typical supporter of the "gradual" bourgeois progress theory.

"The conversation turned upon gradual development. I said that ... gradual development had two sides to it. As well as the gradual development of humane ideas, may be observed the gradual development of ideas of an entirely different order. Serfdom has been put down, but capitalism is growing. And even now, when the idea of liberty is being lauded to the skies, the majority, just as in the days of Batu, feeds, clothes and defends the minority, itself remaining hungry, naked and defenceless. Such an order of things can exist side by side with tendencies and ideas of all sorts, for the art of oppression is also being gradually cultivated."

Chekhov by no means trusted bourgeois civilization. He saw what a later generation was forced to see with such appalling clarity—the development of ideas and phenomena in the bourgeois world, which were mortally hostile to everything humane and progressive. Chekhov understood the futility of the hopes for "a tolerable existence for all" in capitalist conditions, where life is "based on slavery," as the hero of *My Life* goes on to say in his dispute with the "progressive" Dr. Blagovo.

FIGHTING "THE EVIL ONE"

Dr. Korolev, the hero of *From a Doctor's Case-book* (1898), goes to the Lyalikov textile mills near Moscow, to visit the ailing daughter of the proprietress of the factory. He stays overnight, and has a talk with Christina Dmitrievna, former governess to young Miss Lyalikova. Christina Dmitrievna tells the doctor with a certain pride in her voice that she has long been "one of the family." She does exactly as she likes, regaling herself with expensive food and wines. The young girl's trouble is not so much a physical disease, as a social ailment, akin to that from which, Gorky is so fond of showing that, the scions of respectable tradesmen's families suffer; her illness is the voice of conscience, suppressed in the generations which came before her. She is suffering for the sins of her fathers, and, as Korolev sees, no medicine is capable of healing her. Like Chekhov himself, Korolev thoroughly realizes that "it is not the disease itself, but the causes of it" which should be treated.

In the same way Korolev, while not regarding all improvements in the lives of the factory workers as utterly superfluous, compares them to attempts to treat incurable diseases.

In the night, gazing out of the window of the room assigned to him at the crimson windows of the factory building opposite, the doctor muses:

"Fifteen hundred to two thousand factory workers toil without respite, in unwholesome conditions, producing cheap cotton print, living in a state of semi-starvation,

only coming out of this nightmare when they are in the tavern; a hundred more watch over their work, and the entire lives of these hundred are spent in copying out fines, swearing, committing injustices, while only two or three human beings, the so-called proprietors, reap the benefit of it all, though they never work themselves and despise cheap print. And what are these benefits? Both the Lyalikovs, mother and daughter, are wretched, it is distressing to look at them, and only Christina Dmitrievna, a middle-aged, rather stupid spinster, wearing pince-nez, enjoys her life. It all comes to this: work is going on in the five buildings of the factory and cheap print is being sold on Eastern markets in order that Christina Dmitrievna should eat sterlet and drink Madeira."

These words expose, with Chekhov's characteristic neatness and precision, the absurdity and meaninglessness of the capitalist structure.

Listening to the night watchman knocking on a sheet of iron to mark the hours, the doctor imagines that the sound invading the stillness of the night comes from "the monster itself, with the red-hot eyes, the devil who is the master over proprietors and workers alike....

"And he fell to thinking about the devil in whose existence he did not really believe, and kept looking at two windows in which there was a light. It seemed as if the devil himself, that mysterious power from which sprang the relations between the strong and the weak, was peering at him from those crimson eyes ...." He mused on the "guiding force, unknown to anyone, apart from life and from human beings... and gradually a feeling that this unknown, mysterious power was actually near, was gazing at him, came over him. The sky became paler in the East, and time passed rapidly. There was not a soul to be seen, everything seemed to be dead, and the five buildings, silhouetted against the grey dawn, looked different, not at all as they had looked in the daylight.

One forgot that there were steam-driven machines, electric engines and telephones inside them; now they were like lake dwellings, Stone Age buildings, fraught with primitive, insentient power...."

Such is the brilliant conception of the capitalist world offered by Chekhov.

Only an artist whose bright vision can penetrate the depths of social life, and only a democratic artist, would be capable of creating images which were at the same time symbols of such force, such significance.

His sense of justice told Chekhov that "there was more love for mankind in electric power and steam," than in the rejection of bourgeois civilization. But the same inexorable sense of justice made him see something else, too. In the life "entirely built on slavery," that same "electric power and steam," the whole of contemporary technique, the whole product of the brilliance of human genius, served the primitive, insentient, tyrannical power.

Slavery existed in the age of electricity, steam-driven machinery, telephones, just as in the remote Stone Age—it had only assumed different forms.

The impersonal, mechanical, inhuman quality of the elemental forces overpowering man in the bourgeois world, their hard, oppressive crudity were felt by Chekhov as an affront. He saw satanic mockery in the contrast between electricity, steam-driven machinery and telephones, and the depressing primitive nature of human relations, more animal than human, the strong devouring the weak, insentient forces ruling the people as they did in the times of old, notwithstanding the great triumph of the human mind in the field of science and technique. The contrast seemed so wild and incredible to Dr. Korolev as to make him forget there were such things as steam engines and telephones. He felt as if he were back in the Stone Age.

The story *From a Doctor's Case-book* ends on a joyous,

matutinal note of liberty, faith in the rational, beautiful life, freed from the power of the "devil," which was in the offing.

Dr. Korolev tells the ailing heiress of the Lyalikovs that her insomnia "is worthy of respect; it is a healthy symptom, whatever you may say ... we ... our generation, sleep badly, keep yearning for something, talk a great deal, and cannot decide whether we are right or not. But for our children or grandchildren the problem of right and wrong will be solved. They will be able to see further than we do. Life will be good in fifty years or so, a pity we won't be there to see it."

Next morning, a beautiful summer morning, the doctor drove to the station in a carriage; enjoying the scenery and the freshness of the air, "he thought of the time to come, which was perhaps quite near, when life would be as bright and joyous as this calm Sunday morning. . . ."

It was by no means a patriarchal idyll of which Chekhov dreamed. He felt and welcomed the approach of a new life, rational and beautiful, when all the benefits of civilization, all the achievements of human genius would serve, not the "devil," but the happiness of mankind.

Such were the dreams of those better elements among the advanced intellectuals who had not lost touch with the people.

In Chekhov the bourgeois world finds a severe judge.

"The aim of this novel," he wrote of Senkevich's *Polanetsky Family*, "is to lull the bourgeoisie into golden dreams. The bourgeoisie are very fond of so-called 'good' types and novels with happy endings, for they give them the pleasant assurance that one can accumulate capital and retain one's innocence, be a wild beast and yet be happy."

We find a characteristically concise remark in one of Chekhov's notebooks "Travellers in *de luxe* trains—dregs of humanity."

HAPPINESS LIES IN THE FUTURE!

The profoundly democratic nature of Chekhov's writings, the complete absence from his outlook and feelings of anything which might hark back to the reactionary forms of life inherent in history, a social instinct enabling him to reflect the varied moods characteristic of the epoch preceding the first Russian revolution, an impassioned patriotism and knowledge of the creative forces of the people, reinforcing his faith in that flowering of his country which he knew to be imminent, refinement, in the best meaning of the word, and the atmosphere of general revolutionary enthusiasm beginning to make itself felt throughout the country—all helped Chekhov to take his stand with the progressive elements and appreciate progress and civilization rightly.

Lacking, however, any idea of how and by what path his country was to arrive at a joyous and just life, not knowing the forces destined to lead her to prosperity, the role in history that the working class was called to play, he could not always escape those moods of melancholy and grief displayed in his writing, even when the melody of the morrow's happiness sounded strongest in it. The picture of Russian life drawn by Chekhov was necessarily incomplete. In his descriptions of factory workers he was faithful to the tradition—later smashed by Gorky—of treating them as a mass of wretched, downtrodden, exploited men and women. It was not given to

Chekhov to see the revolutionary spirit, to understand that the working class was one day destined to become master of the situation. And he was therefore unable to create the image of a socially active character, a staunch fighter, a well-integrated individual.

This predetermined many characteristic traits of Chekhov's writing, of his style and manner. If we try, "with shut eyes," to listen to the music of his writing, as if we were listening to a voice telling us about all sorts of things and people, a voice which, though richly modulated, is always true to itself, and if we ask ourselves which among all these modulations reappears the most constantly, we shall find that the most typical intonations of this exquisitely musical voice, reminiscent of Astrov's voice, which sounded so sweet in Sonya's ears, are those of melancholy, mournful poetical meditation. It is highly important to remember this when we try to discover the great themes, the deep social ideas on which Chekhov's writings are based. His wrath, contempt, indignation, his protests, satire, even his guesses at the happiness which is so near, are invariably, to a greater or lesser extent, conveyed by these intonations. Tolstoi, whether he rebels, as in *Anna Karenina* and *Resurrection*, or condemns, as in his articles, speaks with a voice of thunder. In the voice of Nekrasov, full of grief as it is, we hear the impassioned note of wrath, sometimes even drowning that of grief. In Shchedrin's satire the notes of wrath, hatred and contempt are preponderant. But in Chekhov's writings, side by side with contempt for vulgarity, a note of profound sadness, which seems to absorb wrath, contempt, protest and laughter, can always be detected; one is tempted to say that his melancholy and lyrical intonations often serve to convey wrath, contempt and protest. It may be added that this was, and still is, one of the reasons preventing readers from realizing that wrath, indignation and hatred play a powerful part in Chekhov's

writing, that they are, socially speaking, very much alive, and in this sense they may be likened to the work of Shchedrin, Nekrasov, Tolstoi and Gorky.

What then is the cause of this peculiarity of Chekhov's writing, of this note of melancholy contemplation?

Chekhov was far from a true comprehension of the revolutionary role of the masses. While criticizing the not-hero of history, he was unable to create the image of a hero. Lack of knowledge and understanding of the revolutionary factor in history resulted, as has already been said, in an incomplete presentation of Russian life, manifesting itself not only in a one-sided portrayal of the factory workers, but in a one-sided portrayal of the peasants, too.

Despite the extraordinary merits of Chekhov's cycle of peasant stories, reflecting so truthfully the actual life of the Russian village of that time, the appalling oppression by the kulak, the lawless tyranny of the authorities, the poverty and ignorance—stories which in their ruthless integrity destroy the romantic conceptions cherished by the Narodniks—there is not a hint in them of the ever-growing indignation among the peasants, of the rebellious spirit of the Russian muzhik.

The most striking feature of Chekhov's peasants is a combination of ignorance, abasement and uncouthness with a profound humanity, a firm faith in justice, a belief that the most important thing in life is—truth. Chekhov's peasant stories are permeated with a profound humanity, with a passionate love for the people, with faith in them, in their great moral power. Lipa (*In the Gully*) is one of the most charming peasant girls in Russian literature. But in none of Chekhov's peasant stories does one feel the growth of the rebellious spirit; the note of melancholy meditation, of profound sympathy, may be discerned in them all, but there is nothing of the Nekrasov challenge to rebellion, no attempt is made in them to discover forces

capable of struggle in the village. All the author can offer is his firm conviction that such appalling conditions cannot go on.

Chekhov's deep-rooted social and historical instinct forced him to recognize progress. But he was prevented from placing implicit faith in the development of progress by the fact that he did not recognize the forces destined to liberate civilization from the power of "the evil one."

He realized that only in that life he awaited and anticipated so eagerly, in which justice would reign, could progress and civilization become sources of happiness to all.

And in all his characters he seems to be telling the reader that it is only in that future life, freed from the gross tyranny of bestial, elemental laws, can true, human, and not merely animal happiness be attained.

In a society where "happiness" is founded on the sufferings and oppression of millions, one has no right to think of personal happiness.

This theme is a familiar one in Russian literature, the ethical standards of which have always been implacably severe. Personal happiness in a society where the happiness of one must needs be founded on the unhappiness of many, is immoral. In the epilogue to *A Nest of the Gentry* the aging Lavretsky, summing up the experience of a lifetime, comes to the conclusion that a decent human being cannot be happy.

With Chekhov this theme had become one of the most important in his writing.

With the full force of the poetical power, the depth and logic of his artistic thought, Chekhov exposes the despicable, unjust nature of selfish, predatory "happiness."

Gooseberries is an interesting example of this.

Ivan Ivanich tells the story of his brother Nikolai Ivanich, a retired civil servant.

All his life Nikolai Ivanich had dreamed of having an estate of his own where he could grow gooseberries.

"He was a meek, good-natured chap, I was fond of him, but could feel no sympathy with the desire to lock oneself up for life on an estate of one's own. They say man only needs six feet of earth.... It is not six feet of earth, not a country-estate, that man needs, but the whole globe, the whole of nature, room to display his qualities and the individual characteristics of his soul."

Such is Chekhov's own conception of true human happiness: unlimited freedom, space, creative work full of daring!

The dream of Nikolai Ivanich comes true. Ivan Ivanich goes to see his brother. The description of the estate becomes symbolical; every line in it exposes the loathsomeness of proprietorship.

"As I approached a fat ginger-coloured dog, remarkably like a pig, came out to meet me. It looked as if it would have barked if it were not so lazy. The cook, who was also fat and like a pig, came out of the kitchen, barefoot, and said her master was having his after-dinner rest. I made my way to my brother's room, and found him sitting up in bed, his knees covered by a blanket. He had aged, and grown stout and flabby. His cheeks, nose and lips protruded—I almost expected him to grunt into the blanket."

And now, at last, the gooseberries—"not gooseberries bought for money, they came from his own garden, and were the first fruits of the bushes he had planted"—appeared on the table. Nikolai Ivanich "ate them greedily, repeating over and over again:

" 'Simply delicious! You try them.'

"They were hard and sour, but, as Pushkin says: 'The lie which elates us is dearer than a thousand sober truths.' "

How unpalatable, how sour, how disgusting is the loathsome happiness of proprietorship!

"There had always been a tinge of melancholy in my conception of human happiness, and now, confronted by a happy man, I was overcome by a feeling of sadness bordering on despair.... How many happy, satisfied people there are, after all, I said to myself! What an overwhelming force! Just consider this life—the insolence and idleness of the strong, the ignorance and bestiality of the weak, all around intolerable poverty, cramped dwellings, degeneracy, drunkenness, hypocrisy, lying.... And yet peace and order apparently prevail in all those homes and in the streets. Of the fifty thousand inhabitants of a town, not one will be found to cry out, to proclaim his indignation aloud.... All is calm and quiet, only statistics, which are dumb, protest: so many have gone mad, so many barrels of drink have been consumed, so many children have died of malnutrition.... And apparently this is as it should be. Apparently those who are happy can only enjoy themselves because the unhappy bear their burdens in silence, and but for this silence happiness would be impossible....

"I left my brother early the next morning, and ever since I have found town life intolerable. The peace and order weigh on my spirits, and I am afraid to look into windows, because there is now no sadder spectacle for me than a happy family seated around the tea-table.... There is no such thing as happiness, nor ought there to be, but if there is any sense or purpose in life, this sense and purpose are to be found not in our own happiness, but in something greater and more rational. Do good!"

Ivan Ivanich is not able to say what ought to be done in order to undermine and break up the foul "happiness," as to the baseness of which even mute statistics cry out. But he sees clearly that struggle against the entire system of life is necessary.

This acute feeling of the impossibility for men to go on living the way they live now, the conviction that the pig-

sties of selfish "happiness," founded on the sufferings of the overwhelming majority, must be cleaned out, is thoroughly typical of Chekhov in the pre-revolutionary period.

Here may be clearly heard the leit-motif of the eve of a new life, of the imminence of radical changes, here is already sounded the note of the challenge to rise in wrath against the complacency of the arrogant and the satisfied.

Before our very eyes the innocent little gooseberry expands, grows, swells, at last reaching gigantic dimensions, eclipsing our planet, becoming a ridiculous symbol. The power of proprietorship lays a ponderous fist on everything, making all it comes into contact with unpalatable, hard, sour, disgusting, robbing life of joy.

The theme of the squalor and gracelessness of selfish "happiness" was powerfully treated by Chekhov as far back as 1894 in *The Teacher of Literature*. Nikitin, a young teacher of literature in a provincial school, marries a girl "of good family," with a respectable fortune.

During the first months of his married life his heart was brimful of bliss.

" 'I am infinitely happy with you, my beloved,' he said, stroking her finger-tips fondly, or plaiting and unplaiting her hair. 'And yet I do not regard this happiness of mine as a thing which has come to me by mere chance, like a bolt from the blue. It is a perfectly natural, consistent and rational phenomenon. I believe in man being the creator of his own happiness, and now I take what I have created with my own hands. Yes, I'll say it outright—I have forged this happiness of mine myself and am enjoying it by right. You know all about my past. My orphaned, poverty-stricken, unhappy childhood, my dreary, melancholy youth, all this has been my struggle, the path to happiness I was laying down.' "

How typical this sort of reasoning is for all those "lucky ones" in a society founded on private property!

But being a Chekhov hero, he cannot (like Rastignac in Balsac's *Human Comedy*, who makes a successful career and amasses a fortune) be content with personal happiness and prosperity.

The day comes when Nikitin, like all those Chekhov characters who enjoy the author's respect, wakes up and regards the life he is leading with shame and disgust, with eyes worthy of a human being, and becomes aware of the vulgarity around him. He now sees everything in an austere, clear light, free from rosy dreams.

"... He felt a passionate desire, a longing ... for something which would carry him away, make him forget himself, feel indifferent towards his personal happiness with its monotonous sensations.... He saw clearly that his peace was shattered and probably for ever.... He was beginning to understand that his illusions had vanished and that a new life, responsive and fully conscious, incompatible with rest and personal happiness, was beginning for him."

A life that is honest and fully conscious is incompatible with self-satisfied personal happiness! "The happiness and joy of life lies neither in money nor in love, but in truth. Even if you go in for animal happiness, life will not let you get drunk and be happy, it will keep showering unexpected blows upon you" (from Chekhov's notebook).

Chekhov's characters fall into two categories: the first, like Nikitin, strive to shake off the vulgarity surrounding them; the second, like Ionich, sink deeper and deeper into its quagmire. In both stories, *The Teacher of Literature* and *Ionich*, the power of the vulgarity, then paramount, is conveyed. The best, the most poetic experience in the life of Ionich, his love for Kitten, turns out to have been not so poetic after all, for Kitten herself had not gone far from the vulgarity of her family and surroundings. The story traces the process of the deterioration and

debasement of an individual who becomes gradually absorbed in the accumulation of capital and property, and develops into a typical specimen of the overwhelming majority of the intellectuals of that day.

Reviewing *In the Gully*, Gorky remarks, with acute insight into the innermost sanctuary of Chekhov's creative work, that Chekhov, "like no one else," reveals, with dazzling lucidity in his works the conflict between man's striving to *be better*, and his striving to *get on* in the world. In a society founded on exploitation these human strivings are incompatible. One can only get on in the world at the cost of others. Therefore it is those who get on *best* that are themselves the *worst*, the most inhuman.

Chekhov's dream was of a way of life in which this eternal oppressive conflict would be removed, in which man's natural strivings should blend in a single one, in which the one who really wants to be better will be best off. But till this time comes, happiness is only to be found in striving to bring about the just life of the future, in strenuous toil in the name of this future. Any other happiness is immoral, monstrous, the sensations accompanying it are humiliatingly monotonous, wretchedly barren.

These lucid conclusions to which Chekhov came were the result of his growing feeling of responsibility before the people.

In his story *On Official Business* (1899), the young examining judge Lyzhin, accompanied by a doctor, arrives at a village for an inquest on a suicide. The blizzard, the dismal poverty-stricken squalor of peasant life, the dark hut used for an office, the suicide of an unlucky wretch of an insurance agent, the old clerk who has been going on his round for thirty years in frost, wind and rain, delivering the letters, notices, forms and taxation papers he carries in his wallet—all this weighs heavily on Lyzhin's spirits. What a dreary, cold, remote life!

Against this background the warm, comfortable, cheerful home of a landowner, to which the doctor and the magistrate are invited, with its elegant young ladies, luxury, music and merry laughter, seems like a vision of fairyland.

To Lyzhin "such a transformation seemed ... fantastic; it was hard to believe that such transformations were possible within a distance of some two or three miles, only an hour's drive. His dismal meditations prevented him from joining in the merriment, and he could not help telling himself that what he saw around him was not life, but just fragments of life, mere scraps, that all this had come about quite casually, and that no conclusions were to be drawn from it. . . ."

He passed an unquiet night in his soft, comfortable bed in the gentleman's house; he kept dreaming he was not there, but still in the Zemstvo hut, with the corpse of the insurance agent beside him. And he had a terrible dream: he dreamed that the suicide and the old clerk "were walking over the snow, side by side, supporting each other; the blizzard raged round them, the wind blew at their backs, and as they walked on they crooned continuously:

" 'On we go, on we go, on we go.'

"The old man was like a wizard in an opera, and their singing was like opera singing, too:

" 'On we go, on we go, on we go. . . . You are warm, you have light, everything round you is soft, and we go on, in frost and blizzard, over the deep snow . . . we know neither peace nor joy. . . . We carry the burden of this life, our own life and yours. . . . Oo-oo-oo! On we go, on we go, on we go. . . .'

"Lyzhin awoke and sat up in bed. What a queer, unpleasant dream!"

He ponders over his dream, and "the thought that had long been obscurely haunting him" suddenly "took shape, in all its breadth and lucidity, in his consciousness." The

thought that life is not made up of independent "scraps" and "fragments," that these are all closely bound up with one another—the poor overworked wretch who had put an end to his life, "the old peasant who goes about every day of his life, from one person to another," and the festive vision of the landowner's home—weighs on his conscience, he feels that he is personally responsible for it all.

"And he felt that the suicide and the hard lives of the peasants lay on his conscience. Was it not a crime to be able to reconcile oneself to the fact that these people, who submitted so meekly to their lot, had to bear the burden of all that was hard and onerous in life? To reconcile oneself to this and to covet for oneself a bright cheerful existence amongst contented men and women, to dream constantly of such a life, was equivalent to be always dreaming of more suicides by men crushed by overwork and cares. . . .

"And again:

" 'On we go, on we go, on we go. . . .'

"It was like someone hammering against his temples."

Such is Chekhov's typically Russian conscience; it hammers on importunately, gives him no rest, there is no escape from it, it is as inexorable, "as rude and implacable as Nikita" (*Ward No. 6*). Conscience forbade happiness, conscience said that the "happiness" of a society founded on private property is based on the perpetual murder of men and women crushed by overwork and care.

Chekhov's hero feels his own responsibility for all that is going on in the world, he does not want to wash his hands of it, to shift his responsibility to another's shoulders. All the complex threads of life are tangled within his conscience, and he feels compelled to disentangle them. There is no hiding from the life of others in cosy little nooks, it will find you wherever you are!

"He (Lyzhin) was sleeping in a warm room, on a soft bed, covered with a blanket, with a sheet of fresh, fine linen under it, but somehow he was not comfortable; perhaps this was because in the next room the doctor and von Taunitz were holding a lengthy conversation, while high over his head, and in the chimney, the blizzard howled as piteously as it had in the office:

" 'Oo-oo-oo!' "

Yes—the blizzard howls not only round the Zemstvo huts, the poverty and hopeless grief of life, it howls round this country mansion, so radiantly comfortable, so warm, it is a *common* blizzard, not a "private, scrappy" one, and there is no getting away from it! *A ruling principle* is needed to bind everything into a whole, to explain the connections between all life's phenomena, its outrageous conflicts, to explain everything through a single, all-embracing relation between men, a single idea. And Chekhov's hero feels how near the world is getting to this ruling idea—it is almost within his grasp and when he has grasped it life will no longer seem to him, as it seemed to the hero of *Dull Story*, a thing parcelled out in disjointed bits, images, fragments. There is a certain affinity between the two stories, *On Official Business* and *Dull Story*; they were written at an interval of ten years, and by comparing them we can see what a great distance has been covered by Chekhov and his hero in this decade. In the earlier story we read of the hero's yearnings for a ruling idea; in the later one we have the pangs of its birth, for that is how the process going on in Lyzhin's mind may be defined.

Chekhov, the poet of happiness, youth, love, now, together with his characters, rejects happiness, associating the idea of it only with the beautiful life in store for humanity. Only then, in the future, all human emotions, among them love, will be worthy of their names!

Chekhov contrived to regard contemporary life with the

eyes of the future. In this respect the story *Visiting Friends* (1898) is highly significant. The extraordinary freshness of thoughts and feelings treated for the first time in literature is bound to strike the reader.

The advocate Podgorin leaves Moscow for a three-day visit to the estate of old friends, the friends of his youth, in response to their urgent invitation. The estate is in danger of going under the hammer, it has been badly mismanaged, and the family looks to Podgorin for help. Among other things, there is a secret hope that Podgorin may marry the young sister of the mistress of the house, a sweet girl called Nadya, and then the estate would be saved. Nadya expects a decisive word from Podgorin, she dreams of joining her fate with his. She is pure-minded and graceful, and longs for a life of honest toil. Podgorin has known her for a long time, ever since she was in her teens; everyone looked upon them as an engaged couple. Podgorin thoroughly realizes that she is no "young miss" on the look-out for a husband, but an intelligent, high-minded girl, extraordinarily kind-hearted, with a meek, gentle soul, that she is as pliable as wax, capable of being moulded into any shape, and that, if she got into the right surroundings, she would make a wonderful woman.

" 'Why shouldn't I marry her, after all?' Podgorin asked himself, and the next moment was frightened by the thought."

What was there to frighten him, and that seriously enough to make him leave the estate surreptitiously the morning after his arrival, although he had meant to stay three days?

Podgorin was frightened off by the same thing which had frightened Nikitin in *The Teacher of Literature*, by the thing which had frightened the brother of the hero of *Gooseberries*, Ivan Ivanich, and other Chekhov characters: he was afraid of happiness.

"Do not fly from your own happiness, Misha," says his old friend, hinting at his relations with Nadya. "Take it while it is within your grasp. If you put it off you will have to run after it, and it will be too late, you will not catch it."

And Podgorin runs, almost literally so—but away from happiness, not in pursuit of it.

He talks to Tatyana, the mistress of the estate, and ponders over her life. Tatyana is a handsome, intelligent woman, who lives for nothing but her two little girls and her husband, Sergei Sergeich.

"Podgorin smiled at her and the little girls, but could not help thinking it strange that this healthy, young woman of average intelligence, a great and complex organism after all, should spend all her energies, all her efforts on such primitive, petty work as arranging the nest which has long been arranged.

" 'Perhaps it is right that she should,' he went on thinking, 'but how very uninteresting and unintelligent it all seems.' "

As he looks at her younger sister, Nadya, Podgorin thinks: " 'And now what once went on in the soul of her sister Tatyana is going on in her own soul, that is to say, she thinks of nothing but love, of marrying as soon as possible, of having a husband, children, and a home of her own.' "

He sees clearly that Nadya's happiness with him would be merely a variation of the happiness enjoyed by Tatyana with her husband Sergei Sergeich; the same selfish comforts—such was life, such its laws! He does not know what to offer in place of those laws, but his whole being revolts against this uninteresting, stale, selfish well-being.

All this time everyone in the estate is trying to believe that everything is going well between him and Nadya. The moon rises, and Nadya waits for

Podgorin to come out to her in the garden; she does not doubt that he will come. Podgorin goes out for a stroll and climbs the staircase inside a turret on the top of the wall. Nadya does not see him, but he can see her face clearly in the moonlight; Nadya feels instinctively that he must be somewhere near. "There's someone about," she says to her dog.

"She stood there waiting, either for him to come down, or to call her to himself, when he would at last make his declaration, and they would both be happy this beautiful, calm night. Dressed in white, pale, slender and wonderfully beautiful in the moonlight, she stood there, waiting for his love... while he felt ashamed, he retreated within himself, keeping quiet, not knowing whether it would be best to speak, to turn everything into a joke as usual, or remain silent; he felt angry with himself, and all he could think of was that here, in the garden, on a moonlit night, near a beautiful, enamoured, dreamy young girl he... remained indifferent... and that it was probably owing to the fact that this sort of poetry no longer existed for him.... He had outlived lovers' meetings on moonlit nights, white-clad, willowy forms, mysterious shadows, turrets, estates, and 'types' like Sergei Sergeich, and, for that matter, like himself, too, with his ennui and permanent state of irritation ... with his exhausting, aching desire for that which was not and could not be had in this world of ours. And now, sitting up there, in the turret, he would have preferred to see some good fireworks, or a procession in the moonlight ... or some other woman standing on the mound where Nadya was standing, who would say something entertaining and new, having nothing to do with love or happiness, or if she did talk about love, it would be love as a challenge to new forms of life, elevated and rational, on the eve of which we perhaps already stand, the breath of which we sometimes almost feel....

" 'There's nobody there,' said Nadya.

"And, after waiting another minute or two, she walked away towards the wood, with drooping head. The dog ran in front. And Podgorin watched the white spot for a long time.

" 'How very awkward all this is!' he kept repeating to himself, as he returned to his room in the annex."

Every line, every word in this story is imbued with the wistfulness of a genius, who, with the clairvoyance of inspiration, feels the presence of another life, on a higher level, somewhere quite near him, just beside him. It is as if a strong wind from the future has reached the poet and raised him to another atmosphere, and the poet looks down on contemporary life from the height of the future, seeing the present as if it were the past, outworn, tedious, stale! To be called upon to help the owners of the estate to hang on to their well-being, to retain their "happiness" as proprietors—what could be more tedious?

All the forms of this life—its mode of existence, its human types, its love, its poetry, its former beauty—have become things of the past. Everything must be different. And scenes of new, hitherto unknown beauty crowd into Podgorin's mind; he dreams of the unknown poetry of the morrow which is to take the place of the "Turgenev" poetry of country-estates, mysterious shadows, white forms with slender waists, moonlight trysts, the poetry of "nests of the gentry," which was once so alluring, but long superseded.

Even a little thing like the dreams of Chekhov and his hero of processions and fireworks, of some great, general holiday, is of interest. New beauty is entering life, beauty for all, the beauty of freedom, of an unprecedented scope of living. It is interesting, this ability of the hero to cast a glance upon himself—from above, as it were, from the heights of the future!—and see himself as a type of the past, of an epoch descending into the mists of yesterday.

The poet seems to hear voices coming to him from the future, to see the new human beings who know what must be done, and how it must be done, human beings who have won their right to joy and love.

Chekhov's characters "postpone" love and happiness to the future, for those who come after them, for only in the future will love and happiness be worthy of the names, when they are purged of vulgarity and filth.

There have not been many artists able to treat the theme of love with its joys and griefs with such penetration and subtlety as the author of *The Lady with the Dog*, *On Love*, and other stories.... It would be absurd to suppose that Chekhov "forbade" himself or his characters love and the joys of married life.

But for him, who regarded the present from the standpoint of the future, a code of life according to which a woman gives her whole mind, all her talents and energy to the care of her little nest, could not but seem monstrous and ridiculous. How rich life could become, if these creative forces were devoted to the great joys of the native land, of the people, of humanity! How much nobler, more elevated and truly poetical would the joys of family life then be!

How acutely aware Chekhov was of the fact that he was working for the future may be seen from a letter he wrote to S. Dyagilev, editor of the bourgeois magazine *Mir Iskusstva* (*The World of Art*), who had given *The Sea-gull* favourable notice, on the strength of which he hoped to lure Chekhov into a religious movement. "The culture of today," wrote Chekhov, "is the beginning of work on behalf of the great future. And the religious movement which you and I were discussing is a survival, it is almost the end of that which has become, or is becoming, a thing of the past."

He strained after inner freedom from "that which had become, or was becoming, a thing of the past" and the

wind of the morrow's freedom for the native land blew with ever-increasing audacity and strength through his writing.

The Man Who Lived in a Shell (1898) is remarkable for its poetic atmosphere, the anticipation of freedom felt throughout it. The entire series—*The Man Who Lived in a Shell, Gooseberries, On Love*—is imbued with a fresh wave of aspirations for freedom, freedom covering the whole of life, the whole of human relationships, with a fresh wave of hatred for the stuffiness of "shells" of all descriptions, of everything which fetters life.

The character of "the man who lived in a shell" is sinister and gloomy, and the dark forces which gave birth to and supported such men were still a grave danger. And yet Belikov is not only sinister; he is ridiculous, too, in his absurd, impotent strivings to stop the course of life, to pack it into a "shell"; he is really a piteous figure with his fear of life, of everything new, everything unlike the things of yesterday. Throughout the story we feel the fresh breeze of life, a breeze which is not favourable to the Belikovs. All his surroundings, the whole of life around "the man who lived in a shell" is in a state of conflict with him, hostile to him.

The very placing of Varenka Kovalenko, with her freshness and spontaneity, side by side with the puny, sickly Belikov seemed to stress the fact that the Belikovs were not long for this world, as the saying is. Belikov is a corpse, he lives as it were in a coffin, and his actual death is regarded by everyone with relief, as the only natural state for "the man in a shell."

The present, founded on "men who lived in a shell," was still strong. But it was ailing and weak in comparison with the true, free life to come. No wonder Belikov was so afraid of life!

There have been endless discussions as to whether Chekhov should be regarded as an optimist or a pes-

simist. Considering the point of view from which they were then held, such discussions could only be utterly hollow and scholastic. Chekhov simply could not be fitted into the framework of this sort of discussion. He was reproached with pessimism by those critics who wanted writers to "lull" them into "golden dreams," whether those dreams were of the peaceful and gradual development of bourgeois progress, of wonder-working home-industry communities and cheese factories, or of "life for life's sake." Essentially these critics belonged to the type of men who strove for the "happiness" which Chekhov's characters rejected so scornfully, for the "happiness" which necessitated no radical change in *a life founded on slavery*. The happiness of which Chekhov dreamed did not fit into such a life; overflowing its banks, it shattered the wretched partitions, the little nooks and sheds of the cheap happiness of property-owners, and swept them away. Chekhov's optimism was of the *hard* kind, uncompromising and austere.

Faith in the beautiful future in store for his native land is expressed in every detail of his writings, his very landscapes are tinged with it.

"How beautiful the trees are, and how beautiful the life around them ought to be!" (*The Three Sisters.*) The hidden music of many Chekhov landscapes is revealed in this sentence.

The Russian landscape seems to be languishing for happiness, for a life worthy of its powerful beauty!

"Sometimes," says Chekhov, through Lopakhin in *The Cherry Orchard*, "when I can't get to sleep, I begin thinking: 'Oh, God, Thou hast given us vast forests, spacious fields, distant horizons, and we who are living here ought to be giants ourselves! . . .' " The traditional beauty of moonlit nights have become associated for Chekhov with his dream of the triumph of justice: ". . . and everything on the earth was only waiting to be merged with

justice, as the moonlight merges with the night" (*In the Gully*).

The insistent, passionate melody of the oneness of truth and beauty rings with wonderful force throughout the poetic undercurrent of Chekhov's writings.

Everything on Russian soil strove to *merge with truth*, and Chekhov was the poet of these strivings, of the unconquerable faith of the Russian people in the triumph of truth.

Gorky tells us in his memoirs how Lev Tolstoi, who almost worshipped Chekhov, once said to him: "*You're* a Russian now, yes, you're very, very Russian!" "And, smiling very sweetly," says Gorky, "Tolstoi put his arm round the shoulders of Anton Pavlovich."

"In everything he does, still more in what he writes," says one of Chekhov's contemporaries, the writer P. Sergeyenko, "you cannot help feeling the youthful soul of the Russian people, with its poetry and humour.... In his personal appearance, too, Chekhov looked like a typical Russian peasant. There is hardly a village where you would not be sure to meet some peasant like Chekhov, with the Chekhov expression, his smile.... There is hardly a village in which you would not find a Chekhov, as it were, in the rough.... Chekhov is so typically a son of his people that if you disregard his nationality you will never be able to understand him perfectly, either as a man or a writer.

"Chekhov's tastes were typically Russian, too, like those of a peasant. He liked simple people, simplicity in art."

However different from one another were the people who knew Anton Pavlovich, they all had the image of him as a profoundly national type engraved on their minds.

"There was," remembered A. I. Kuprin, "something almost gawky, almost humble in his appearance, something

profoundly Russian, national, in his face, his intonations, his turns of speech."

Chekhov could have said of himself what a character in *On the Way* says: "I loved the Russian people with a kind of aching love ... loved ... their language, their art." And when his characters, struck by the beauty of their native land, think of "how great, how beautiful this land is" (*Gooseberries*), or exclaim (like the heroine in *Office for the Dead*): "How lovely my country is, oh, God!"—they voice the innermost thoughts and feelings of the author himself. It was his own Russian soul responding to the beautiful austere mother country.

THE SEA-GULL

Chekhov began to work on *The Sea-gull* in 1895. The play was produced on the stage of the Alexandrinsky Theatre, Petersburg, in October 1896. Everything Chekhov wrote for the theatre before *The Sea-gull* was of course extremely talented and interesting, but up till then his plays had been distinctly inferior to his fiction. *The Sea-gull* marks the beginning of the phase in which Chekhov showed himself to be a dramatist of genius.

The Sea-gull may be considered the most *personal* of all his works. It is his only long work frankly devoted to the theme of art. In this play the author expresses his most cherished thoughts—thoughts on the difficult path of the artist, of what makes the essence of artistic talent, of what human happiness consists in.

The Sea-gull is an infinitely subtle product of Chekhov's dramatic genius; like life itself, it is simple and complicated, and its true inner theme is not revealed all at once, just as we are unable at once to unravel the complex situations, the bewildering maze of circumstances with which life confronts us. The author seems to be offering us a choice of interpretations of the play.

The principal theme in *The Sea-gull* is that of the heroic feat. Only he who is capable of accomplishing such feats can conquer in art. But at first acquaintance the play may appear much poorer than its theme,

A beautiful girl, Nina Zarechnaya, lives on the shores of a picturesque lake. She dreams of the stage, of glory. The young writer, Konstantin Treplev, a young neighbour of hers, is in love with the girl. And Nina responds to his feelings. He, too, has his dreams—both of glory and of "new forms in art"—of what does not youth dream?

He has written a play, unusual, strange, decadent in style, which he is producing with the most original scenery: the real lake forms a background to the stage, which has been put up in the park.

The principal role in the play is taken by Nina Zarechnaya.

Treplev's mother, Arkadina, a despotic, self-willed woman, spoiled by her fame as an actress, openly laughs at her son's play. The sensitive Treplev orders the curtain to be lowered. The performance breaks off in the middle. The play is a failure.

But this misfortune is by no means the worst to befall Treplev, who has always been unlucky—expelled from the University "owing to circumstances over which he had no control," he languishes in forced idleness on the estate of his uncle, in the wretched and ambiguous position of a dependent on a stingy mother. And now, to crown all, Treplev is faced with the loss of his beloved.

Arkadina, who has come to visit her brother on his estate, has brought with her her constant companion, the well-known author Trigorin. Nina falls in love with Trigorin with all the ardour of a first passion. Her affection for Treplev turns out to have been nothing but youthful dreams. Her passion for Trigorin is her first, perhaps her only, love.

Nina broke with her family to go on the stage to Moscow, where Trigorin lives. And her intimacy with Trigorin ended in tragedy for herself. He cooled to her, returning to his "earlier love," Arkadina. "The fact is," as Treplev says, "he never abandoned his former love, but

simply managed to keep up with both, from sheer inertia...." Nina had a child from Trigorin. The baby died.

Konstantin Treplev's life is ruined. He attempted suicide after his break with Nina. But he still goes on writing. His stories are gradually finding acceptance in the big magazines, but his life is joyless. He is powerless to overcome his love for Nina.

Nina Zarechnaya became a provincial actress. After a prolonged absence she visited her native haunts once more. A meeting with Treplev takes place. He has a moment of hope that their former relations may be renewed. But she still loves Trigorin—loves him "even more than before." The play ends with the suicide of Treplev. His life breaks off in the middle, like his play.

While working on *The Sea-gull*, Chekhov wrote in regard to the play: "A lot of talk about literature, not much action, tons of love."

There certainly is a great deal of love in the play—the love of Treplev for Nina, Nina's love for the writer Trigorin, Arkadina's love for Trigorin, the love of Masha Shamrayeva, the bailiff's daughter, for Treplev, the love of the teacher Medvedenko for Masha, and the love of Polina Andreyevna, Shamrayev's wife, for Dr. Dorn. And every one of these loves is unhappy.

It might be considered that the main theme of the play is precisely this unhappy love. And the author seems to go to meet such an interpretation half-way. We are offered the treatment of the play to be found in Trigorin's notebook. Constantly jotting down observations, characteristic subjects which come into his head, Trigorin notes "a subject for a short story." This subject is suggested to him by Treplev's shooting of the sea-gull and placing it at the feet of Nina. Trigorin gives Nina a rough outline of it:

"...A young girl like yourself has lived all her life on the shores of a lake. She loves the lake as the sea-gull

does, she is free and happy as the sea-gull itself. Then a man comes along, sees her, and from sheer idleness destroys her as this sea-gull has been destroyed."

This also might be a summary of the play. After all the man who from sheer idleness ruins a sweet girl would afterwards appear to have been Trigorin himself, the ruined maiden being Nina. That is why, it might be concluded, the play is called "The Sea-gull."

Such an interpretation of the play is unfortunately extremely widespread, but in reality all this is merely a "subject for a short story" by Trigorin, and by no means the subject of a great play by Chekhov. Such a subject only exists in *The Sea-gull* as a possibility contradicted by the whole course of the action, a hint which might have materialized, but did not.

Yes, a beautiful maiden lived on the shores of an "enchanted" lake, in a tranquil world of tender emotions and dreams. In this world there also lived Konstantin Treplev. But the time came when they both had to face life as it really is. And life, as it really is, can be extremely harsh, as well as tender. "Life is harsh!" says Nina in the fourth act. And in real life everything is a great deal harder than it seemed in the dreams of youth.

Nina saw art as a sunlit path to glory, a beautiful dream. And then she entered upon life. How many obstacles and entanglements life has placed in her path, what a heavy burden it has placed on her frail shoulders! She was abandoned by a man whom she loved to distraction. Her child died. She soon found she could expect help from no one; her undeveloped talent, which was still at the stage when children learn to walk, met with no support anywhere, and the very first steps it took could easily have proved fatal. Her beloved did not believe in the theatre, was always laughing at her dreams, and little by little she stopped believing herself, and lost heart, Nina tells Treplev at their last meeting. "And then, love

troubles, jealousy, perpetual anxiety about the baby.... I became petty-minded, insignificant, my acting became mediocre. I did not know what to do with my hands, how to stand on the stage, I had no control over my voice. You can't imagine how terrible it is to feel that you are acting atrociously."

The dreamy girl had to encounter drunken merchants, all the outrageous vulgarity of the theatrical world in the provinces of that day.

And despite her femininity and spiritual delicacy, she managed to keep her head when her dreams came up against real life. At the price of much suffering she mastered the truth that "for us, whether we are actors or writers, the main thing is not fame, not brilliance, not what I dreamed of, but the power to endure. Know how to bear your cross and go on believing. I have faith, and I no longer suffer so much, and when I think of my vocation, I do not fear life."

These are proud words, learned at the price of youth, through bitter experience, through sufferings only known to the artist who has to do what he detests, despising himself, his own timid figure on the stage, the poverty of his literary style. In order to appreciate Nina's development, one needs to compare with these words of hers, her former childish illusions about talent and glory. Then she had said to Trigorin: "If I were a writer like you I would give my whole life to the crowd, but I would realize that their sole happiness lay in raising themselves to my level, and they would draw me in a chariot....

"TRIGORIN: In a chariot, very well.... So I'm Agamemnon, am I? (*Both smile.*)"

Here, too, we come up against Chekhov's ironical attitude to the idea of the "hero" raised high above the "crowd," an idea so beloved by the intellectuals of the day. Nina grew to understand the absurdity of this idea. What was needed was to work, work unremittingly, to

endure, to bear all hardships, to preserve one's faith, regardless of self, of one's own "individuality," one's "exceptional" nature. Talent is—patience, faith, humility. And we readers, who have traversed with Nina throughout the play the sorrowful and yet joyous path of the victorious artist, are proud of her, feeling all the significance of her words in the last scene: "I'm not like that now.... I'm a real actress, I act with enjoyment, with enthusiasm, I work myself into a state of intoxication on the stage, and feel that I am beautiful. And now, living here,I keep walking about, thinking all the time, and I feel my spiritual powers getting stronger every day...."

Nina has faith, strength, will-power, now she has knowledge of life, and a proud happiness of her own. For only that beauty is truly beautiful which knows all and yet believes. The beauty of the first early dreams is the beauty of ignorance, it is only *potential* beauty.

Thus it is through the gloom and sorrows of life overcome by the heroine that we catch the leit-motif of *The Sea-gull*—the theme of soaring flight, of victory. Nina is a living contradiction of that version which makes her out to be a stricken sea-gull, she does not treat her sufferings, her searches, her attainments, her whole life, as merely a "subject for a short story." In her last conversation with Treplev she repeats: "I am the sea-gull. No, that's not it.... Do you remember shooting the sea-gull? A man passed by, saw it, and destroyed it from sheer idleness ... the subject for a short story ... that's not it...."

No, that was not it. Not the fall of the stricken sea-gull, but the soaring of the beautiful, frail, free creature high up towards the sun. Such is the poetical theme of the play.

Why did Treplev, who had made an unsuccessful attempt at suicide when Nina left him but, having accepted the loss of Nina as inevitable, assured his mother,

after mature thought and profound soul-searchings, that he would never again try to kill himself, nevertheless, after meeting Nina again, make a second, and this time a "successful" attempt?

Was it not because he saw with devastating clarity how far Nina had outstripped him? She has entered upon real life, hard, harsh and solitary as it may be, she is approaching real art, while he still dwells in the world of dreamy immature emotions which they had inhabited together. In his branch of art he still "does not know what to do with his hands, has no control over his voice." It is precisely this which is torturing him before Nina reappears on the scene.

"I used to talk a lot about new forms, but now I feel that I am gradually sinking into a rut myself. (*Reads.*) 'The poster on the fence revealed ... a pale countenance, framed in dark hair.' Revealed ... framed.... Awful! (*Crosses out.*) Trigorin has worked out his own formulas, he writes easily ... but I can't get rid of 'quivering light, the serene twinkling of the stars, the distant sounds of a piano, dying out in the fragrant air'.... It's so tantalizing."

Treplev's anguish in no way differed from that which Nina had to endure in the path she followed. A sea-gull, she had flown far, far away from him. In the last act Nina appears before us profoundly shaken, she still suffers severely, she still loves Trigorin, and will continue to love him. How could she fail to be shaken, after all she has gone through? But through all her torments a light gleams somewhere far in the distance—the light of victory.

This was the light which had such an effect on Treplev. The consciousness that he had as yet attained nothing penetrated him with cruel force. Now he understands the reason for it all. "You have found your road," he tells Nina. "You know where you are going and I am

still blundering about in a chaos of daydreams and images, not knowing what it's all for, or who needs it. I do not believe in my vocation, and I do not know what it is." He can do nothing with his talent because he has neither aim, nor faith, nor knowledge of life, neither boldness nor strength. For all his talk of innovation, he has fallen into a rut. Innovation cannot exist in a vacuum, it can only exist as a conclusion drawn from a courageous knowledge of life, in an atmosphere of spiritual and mental wealth. And what had Treplev done to enrich his inner life? Nina had managed to convert her very sufferings into victory. But for him suffering had remained mere suffering, futile, drying up the very springs of the soul.

When we consider Treplev and his fate, we are forced to the conclusion: "Talent! How little it means!" When we think of Nina and her fate, we exclaim: "Talent! How much it is!"

While striving to escape from the power of the trivial and the commonplace, Treplev feels with horror that the commonplace has invaded him. His play was apparently written in a high-flown style, far removed from prosaic everyday life. And in his stories he came up against the most trivial commonplace—all these posters on the wall, announcing.... "Awful!" he exclaims in anguish. He might have said: "Prosaic, commonplace!"

One cannot escape from triviality by flight into illusion, into dreams remote from life. This is a false flight, inevitably ending in a fall, in the return to still worse triviality. Elusive, "beautiful," transparent visions brought Kovrin (*The Black Monk*) to a point where the beauty of real life wrecked brought him to ugliness, to distortion, to death. The abstract "beautiful" dreams of Treplev led him to that which is hideous, inimical to beauty, to the infringement of the laws of life—to suicide. There is no running away from the commonplace, there is no hiding from it. One must see it clearly, face it, *as-*

Chekhov with actors and producers of the Moscow Art Theatre

Anton Chekhov and Lev Tolstoi in the Crimea, 1902

sail it. Nina saw the base prose of life clearly, she knew that life was "harsh," she did not flee from vulgarity and harshness into false dreams. She is the embodiment of true art, and true art is the knowledge of the whole truth about life, and aspirations towards the beauty in life itself, and not merely in dreams.

The theme of the commonplace, of dull routine, is of great importance in *The Sea-gull*. The commonplace has Trigorin and Arkadina in its grip, and Treplev is not far from the truth when he brands them as "slaves of routine." But he is himself not free from the tenacious power of this same commonplace.

And so—this time in its reference to the sphere of art—Chekhov thinks constantly of the ways of fighting the vulgarity of life around him.

The well-known advocate A. F. Koni, an intelligent theatre-goer of the day, wrote to Chekhov after the first few performances of *The Sea-gull* that the play contains "... life itself ... and scarcely anyone has understood its concealed keen irony."

There can be no doubt as to the "concealed keen irony" of the play. The destinies of Nina Zarechnaya and Konstantin Treplev develop to a certain extent on similar lines. In both cases there are the growing pains of talent not yet come to full strength. In both cases there is unhappy love, the loss of the beloved. In the case of Nina this is immeasurably increased by the loss of her child. And yet the fragile young woman survives all ordeals, and Treplev sinks beneath them. Thus it is that his "symbol," as Nina calls it—the dead sea-gull cast at her feet—acquires its true significance. Treplev identifies himself with the slaughtered sea-gull.

"NINA: What does that mean?

"TREPLEV: I was base enough to shoot this sea-gull today. I lay it at your feet.

"NINA: What's the matter with you? *(Picks up the sea-gull and looks at it.)*

"TREPLEV: (*after a pause*): I shall soon be killing myself in the same way."

We now discern the complicated, many-faceted significance, penetrating the whole play like sunbeams, of the image of the sea-gull. By a twist of concealed keen irony it turns out that the slaughtered sea-gull is not the fragile girl, but the young man who considers himself a bold, strong innovator.

There can be no doubt of the sympathy Chekhov feels for Treplev. But since Chekhov encountered infinitely greater difficulties in the struggle for the triumph of the creative will than those which fell to the lot of Treplev, he cannot forgive weakness. He could no more forgive weakness in his favourite characters than in his brothers Alexander and Nikolai. Art was for him the sacred cause of the confirmation of truth, beauty and freedom. Talent meant for him a weapon which must never be laid down.

As we see, *The Sea-gull* is closely bound up with all Chekhov's meditations on the essence of talent, on his outlook on the world, on the "ruling principle." Konstantin Treplev's chief misfortune is that he has no purpose capable of inspiring his talent. The sage Dr. Dorn says to Treplev: "All writing should have a clear, definite idea in it. You must know for whom you write, otherwise, if you follow this picturesque path with no definite purpose, you will lose your way and your talent will be your undoing."

Talent with no outlook on the world, with no clear, definite idea, is a poisonous blossom, bearing within it the ruin of its possessor. Like the hero of *Dull Story*, Konstantin Treplev was in a state in which the slightest impetus would have been enough to make life seem a thing devoid of meaning.

The same theme—the appalling misery of life for the artist without a well-defined outlook—has even more bearing on the image of Trigorin.

His sufferings are on a higher level than those of Treplev. An experienced writer, Trigorin groans beneath the burden of talent inspired by no great purpose. His talent lies heavy within him like a cannon ball, to which he is fettered like a convict.

Chekhov put no little of himself and his circumstances into the character of Trigorin. This makes itself felt with especial force in the tragic words with which Trigorin replies to Nina's childish raptures to her worship of his success and fame.

"Success?" echoes Trigorin in sincere astonishment. "I have never been able to please myself. I don't like myself as a writer. I like that water, those trees, the sky, I feel nature, it arouses passion in me, an irresistible desire to write. But after all, I'm not only a landscape-painter, I'm a citizen, too. I love my country, my fellow-countrymen, I feel that, since I am a writer, I am bound to write about the people, their sufferings, their future, about science, the rights of man, and so on and so forth, and I hasten to write about all these things, everyone goads me on, scolds me, I plunge from side to side like a fox pursued by hounds, I see that life and science go on and on, while I lag further and further behind, like a peasant trying to catch a train, until at last I feel I can do nothing but describe landscapes, and am false to the marrow about everything else."

The image of the questing artist rises before us with these words, so remarkable in their sincerity and depth. Again and again the familiar Chekhov refrain is heard. The artist must help his native land, his fellow-countrymen in the solution of the fundamental problems of life, must march shoulder to shoulder with life, with

progressive social thought, with science, must not fall behind. Art is not false when it shows the path to the future.

Trigorin expresses many of Chekhov's own thoughts and emotions.

But Trigorin is no Chekhov. In moulding his image, Chekhov as it were projected, generalized those traits which he felt to be a possible threat to his talent.

Trigorin is threatened by the danger of creative work not imbued with feeling or inspiration, the danger of mere technical perfection, the dangers arising from the lack of a "ruling principle." To a certain extent art had become a matter of routine. His author's notebook bade fair to become a sort of bookkeeper's ledger—he writes from the habit of writing, and not from a passionate desire to sear the hearts of men with words. He longs for this desire, sensing that therein lies his strength, the guarantee that routine will not devour him. The artist should always welcome his art as if it were his first love, as Nina welcomes her love for Trigorin. The artist's skill, his experience, should not prevent, but enhance this joy of the first encounter with art—each encounter, the first—for ever joyous, for ever agonizing and arduous. Artistic skill is precisely the ability to cleanse the soul of all that might darken the joy of the first encounter with art. And Trigorin does not know this feeling of the first joy and the first anguish. It goes without saying that there is also a profound inner connection between Trigorin's lack of this feeling and his inability whole-heartedly to welcome the first love of a young girl who says to him: "Accept my life." Yes, the power of the commonplace, amounting in the last resort to the power of vulgarity, is extremely clinging, and only a lofty passion, only a great idea is capable of withstanding it. Will Trigorin find such an idea? Is he not destined to become a kind of Shalimov, a character in Gorky's *Summer Visitors*?

There is nothing particularly poetical or exalted in the relation between Arkadina and Trigorin. Arkadina is incapable of aiding him in the fight with the commonplace, of inspiring him. She holds him by flattery, which means that she is unable to help him to convert his dissatisfaction with himself as a writer into creative dissatisfaction, leading to bold, resolute, difficult, joyous quests for the new. Everything goes to show that Arkadina can introduce no creative element into the life of Trigorin, and is much more likely to intensify his tendencies to conservatism and stagnation.

Arkadina is too much absorbed in her own success, in the giddy throng, the external, superficial aspect of art —it is not for nothing that she chatters so animatedly with that out-and-out vulgarian Shamrayev, who sees in art nothing but shallow entertainment. To him she can give a glowing account of her "reception" in Kharkov, of the gifts showered on her by the admirers of her talent. All this shows that for Arkadina, also, her art had degenerated, to a certain extent, into the commonplace. Both in Trigorin and Arkadina Chekhov notes traits common to a certain category of writers and actors of the eighties and nineties, not inspired by great idealistic purposes, by lofty emotions, and therefore inevitably falling victims to routine, conservatism and vulgarity.

Nina alone had raised herself above the commonplace. And this precisely because she does not, like Treplev, take refuge from the commonplace in illusions.

She had come up against the clinging power of vulgarity, and had not yielded to it. Such is the image of true art, the true artist, created by Chekhov.

There is another great theme, and one which has tormented many artists, connected with the figures of Trigorin and Arkadina. Art has absorbed and devoured Trigorin so completely that neither will-power nor even the capacity for strong, sincere feelings for ordinary, every-

day life is left in him. This is the usual problem of the artist in bourgeois society, in which, as Marx pointed out, the victories of art are won at the price of a certain spiritual deterioration. Trigorin complains to Nina: "... I feel that I am devouring my own life, that for the honey I offer the world at large I shake the pollen from my most beautiful flowers, tearing up the flowers themselves, and trampling on their roots. Surely I must be a madman!"

The interpreter of the role of Trigorin must be able to convey a combination of such a character's attractiveness and spiritual deterioration, the creative gift of the artist, and the torments fettering his talent, the capacity for momentary spurts of enthusiasm, the languor and indecision in the sphere of personal life. The producer must never allow himself to forget that both Trigorin and Arkadina are, for all their great defects, interesting, gifted persons. The conflicting traits in Arkadina's nature—her ability to "sob over a book, to learn the whole of Nekrasov by heart," to tend the sick with loving care, her love of work and at the same time her egoism, the way she has fallen into the theatrical rut, her pettiness—all testify both to her human qualities and her artistic nature, and, at the same time, to the corrupting influence of bourgeois society on the artist.

Trigorin does not feel that he is the absolute, unshackled master of his talent, precisely because he does not feel in himself the enthusiasm of one who has within him a ruling principle. His talent kept him on a leash, much as Arkadina did.

But in the character of Nina Zarechnaya Chekhov expressed the beauty of the bold, arduous, and yet free flight. Nina "outstripped" not only Treplev, but Trigorin, too.

All this does not mean that Chekhov, in the image of Nina Zarechnaya, offers a realistically exact history of the

development and growth of the artist. Nina Zarechnaya, while maintaining the stamp of a living individual, is at the same time a poetical symbol. She is the very soul of art, conquering gloom and cold, ever striving onward and upward.

What made Chekhov put such "tons of love" into *The Sea-gull*?

Once more we meet with the constant Chekhov theme: "Happiness is to be found, not in love, but in truth." If all you want is happiness for yourself, if your soul is not filled with the desire for the good of all, if it gives itself up to nothing but personal feelings, life will smite you cruelly, and will not give you happiness.

Take Masha Shamrayeva, Nina's contemporary. She is a poetical creature, she feels the beauty of the human soul. But her life, like that of Katya, the professor's adopted daughter (*Dull Story*), has no inspiration, is guided by no purpose. Masha introduces herself to Trigorin with bitter words: "Masha, who has neither kith not kin, and lives in this world for no known reason." Like so many ordinary girls of that day, she has nothing to which she can apply her aspirations towards the beautiful and lofty. Nothing is left to her but the sphere of love, in which there is so much that is purely accidental, and which may easily lead to ruin when there is no reliable support in the soul.

Love becomes ugly, loses all its beauty, if it is the only thing in one's life.

Futile love, like a narcotic, robs Masha of her personality, gradually erasing from her soul its beauty and poetry, and turning her into an eccentric. How hard and callous is her attitude to the teacher Medvedenko, with his humble, self-effacing love, whom she marries "in desperation." How repellent her indifference to her child! She is just as pitiable in her love for Treplev as her mother,

Polina Andreyevna, with her absurd jealous love for Dr. Dorn.

Thus love—the joyous emotion which should bring with it such divine elation, such a flowering of the best spiritual forces, love, which is the poetry of life, capable of making human beings inspired and talented, opening their eyes to the beauty of the world, love, which reveals the infinite wealth of the soul—becomes an impoverished, beggarly thing, its exquiste countenance old and wrinkled just as Masha gets more and more like her mother, Polina Andreyevna. When the whole of life is concentrated solely around love, when love is isolated from the common stream of life, it becomes, like the beautiful maiden in the fairy story, who was turned into a frog by an evil magician, its own opposite, its beauty turned to hideousness.

And it is by no means because her love is hopeless that this happens to Masha. Even hopeless love has a beauty of its own. Nina's love for Trigorin is also hopeless. But Nina does not live by love alone. She lives for the vast infinite world of creative work, too, for the service of humanity in its aspirations towards beauty. And so even hopeless love can enrich Nina, help her to understand life and human beings more deeply and, consequently, to labour for them still better. Whereas Masha's love can only rob her of her personality.

"If the whole purpose of our life consisted only in the attainment of personal happiness," said the revolutionary-democratic critic Belinsky, "and if our personal happiness consisted only in love, then life would indeed be but a gloomy desert, strewn with coffins and broken hearts, it would be a hell, before which all the poetical images of hell on earth sketched by the genius of the austere Dante would pale.... But thanks to eternal Reason, thanks to benevolent Providence, there is yet another great world of human life, as well as the inner world of

the heart—the world of historical contemplation and public activities, that great world in which thoughts become deeds, and lofty emotions—feats.... This is the world of incessant toil, endless activity and philosophical development, the world of a perpetual struggle between the future and the past."

For Chekhov, to live meant first and foremost to do creative work. There is no true life without the work one loves. Arkadina claimed to be younger than Masha, explaining this by the fact that she worked, while Masha did not live. Arkadina feels young and Masha sees herself as an old woman.

"I have a feeling," she says, "that I was born long, long ago."

Treplev says almost the same about himself:

"My youth seems suddenly to have been torn away from me, and I feel as if I had been living ninety years."

Where there is no faith in one's vocation, no engrossing passion for creative work, no purpose, no ideas, there is neither life nor youth. The soul ages and, as Masha admits, "there is often not the slightest desire to live." Thus is revealed the inner kinship between Masha and Treplev. Perhaps it was because he was vaguely aware of this that Treplev was so irritated by Masha's love for him. Neither of them had the strength to withstand the futile passion devouring them, neither of them had a great, lofty social purpose in life. In the last resort they both turned out to be spiritual bankrupts.

And this is the meaning of the love theme in the play.

There may, however, have been another reason for the prevalence of love in *The Sea-gull*, for love seemed just then to be about to enter the life of Chekhov himself....

The writer T. L. Shchepkina-Kupernik mentions Lika in her memoirs of Chekhov. Lidia Stakhievna Mizinova

was "an unusually beautiful girl, a veritable swan-princess from the Russian fairy-tale. With her curly ash-blonde hair, clear grey eyes beneath 'sable brows,' her extraordinary gentleness . . . combined with an utter lack of affectation and almost austere simplicity, she was fascinating. Anton Pavlovich was by no means indifferent to her."

Their friendship hovered on the threshold of the tenderest love. But Chekhov never took the decisive step. Lika knew how to fall into the tone of jesting irony with which he treated their relationship. In their letters to one another they both joke continually. But this tone could not satisfy her. It became harder and harder for her to master her feelings. In one of her letters she even goes so far as to ask him to help her in her struggle with herself.

"You know very well what my attitude to you is, and I therefore feel no shame in writing about it. I know what your attitude is, too; it is either one of indulgence or utter indifference. My most ardent desire is to cure myself of the appalling state in which I find myself, but this is very difficult to do all alone. Help me, I implore you, don't invite me, don't keep on seeing me. It's not much to you, and it might help me forget you. . . ." They were undoubtedly strongly attracted to one another. But the moment their relations, half-friendly, half-amatory, threatened to develop into something more serious, Chekhov, like the hero of his story *Visiting Friends*, "turned it all into a joke as usual." He did help Lika, but not in the way she asked him to, not by putting a stop to their seeing each other, but by incessant joking. He helped her to "let off steam" by joking about her feelings to her face, so as to make her believe things were not so serious after all.

After some time Lika was able to remember more or less calmly that Chekhov had "twice rejected her."

As for Chekhov himself, he must have gone through much the same experience as his characters did when they renounced happiness.

It was not that he had made up his mind once and for all to flee a great passion. Quite the contrary: it is at the time of his friendship with Lika that we come across admissions like the following in his letters: "Life is flat without a great passion," and hints that it was time for him to marry. Evidently he admitted both the possibility of a great passion and of marriage. And yet he chose to "turn it all into a joke."

Then events took a turn which, as Y. Sobolev, who was the first to publish Lika Mizinova's letters to Chekhov, justly points out, provided Chekhov with material for *The Sea-gull*. Lika, the "twice-rejected," threw herself into another love-adventure. The writer Potapenko was a frequent guest at Melikhovo. Concerts were got up. Lika, who was studying to sing in opera, played the piano. Potapenko had a good voice. There was plenty of music and poetry in Melikhovo. Lika fell in love with Potapenko—perhaps "on the rebound." "As for me, I—have finally fallen in love with Potapenko," she wrote to Chekhov. "It can't be helped, Daddy, can it? You always manage to get rid of me and shove me on to someone else, you know."

Potapenko's wife had a disposition very like that of Arkadina in *The Sea-gull*. And the behaviour of Potapenko resembled that of Trigorin's. A stage-struck girl and a married writer, unable either to renounce the love of a young girl or to respond seriously to her love—such is the subject of *The Sea-gull*, taken as it were from the drama in real life being enacted at Melikhovo.

Lika came through the ordeal which fell to her share. There is every reason to suppose that even during the period of her passionate love for Potapenko his image concealed another in her heart—that of one infinitely

more capable of feeling her charm, of one whose feeling for her was infinitely stronger, and who had not chosen to change his feelings into the small coin of a fleeting romance.

The story of Lika Mizinova's unhappy love explains both the source from which the subject of *The Sea-gull* came, and the secret sources of the chief characters in the play, especially that of Trigorin. Just as for Lika the images of Chekhov and Potapenko must have merged into one, the image of Trigorin in *The Sea-gull* combines as it were Chekhov and Potapenko, strange as the combination of two such incommensurable quantities may seem. But the combination seemed quite a natural one to Chekhov, for he regarded the events developing in *The Sea-gull* through the eyes of Nina Zarechnaya, or, we may say, of Lika Mizinova. Trigorin's thoughts on literature, his discontent as a writer, a citizen and a patriot, are those of Chekhov himself. His behaviour to Nina Zarechnaya and Arkadina is the behaviour of Potapenko. But it would be as wrong to divide Trigorin mechanically into two parts—the man and the writer—as it would be to derive his image from the two prototypes. Trigorin is by no means merely the "sum of two items," he is something quite independent of his prototypes.

EVERYTHING MUST BE BEAUTIFUL ABOUT THE HUMAN BEING!

The theme of *Uncle Vanya* is the life of "little men" with its hidden sufferings and self-effacing toil for the happiness of others; in fact, it is the theme of beauty wasted in vain.

From the memoirs of Nadezhda Konstantinovna Krupskaya, Lenin's wife, we learn that Lenin had a very high opinion of this play.

After seeing *Uncle Vanya* produced by the Art Theatre in October 1899, after its successful tour of the provinces, Gorky wrote to Chekhov:

"Since you say you do not want to write for the theatre I feel I ought to let you know what people of discernment think of your plays. They say, among other things, that *Uncle Vanya* and *The Sea-gull* represent a new kind of dramatic art, in which realism is raised to the level of inspired, deeply thought-out symbolism. And in my opinion this is quite true. As I watched your play I thought of life being sacrificed to an idol, of the invasion of the wretched life of man by beauty, and of many other fundamental things. Other plays do not lead one away from everyday reality to the sphere of philosophy, as yours do...."

Chekhov indicates by the very title of the play the simplicity and workaday ordinariness both of his characters and their sufferings.

Uncle Vanya and his niece, Sonya, have toiled all their life on behalf of another's happiness: they work for the material well-being of Sonya's father, Professor Serebryakov, whom they have taught themselves to regard as a great scholar, gifted and advanced. Professor Serebryakov, now retired, is married for the second time to a young and beautiful woman. His first wife, Sonya's mother and Uncle Vanya's sister, has long been dead.

The estate which Uncle Vanya and Sonya managed had belonged to Sonya's mother. Sonya was now its sole owner, Uncle Vanya having relinquished his share in the legacy in favour of his beloved sister, thanks to which sacrifice, their father had been able to buy landed property. But he had paid nothing like the whole sum, and it was deeply encumbered with debt. Uncle Vanya toiled to pay off these debts and set the estate in order. For twenty-five years he had worked "like the most diligent bailiff," receiving a wretched salary from Serebryakov, to whom he sent the entire profits yielded by the estate, so that the professor could write his scientific papers and deliver himself of his University lectures in peace. Uncle Vanya and Sonya seldom left the estate, went without sufficient food, oblivious to everything but their solicitude for the professor. Not once had the idea that the estate, both morally and legally, belonged to *them* and not to Serebryakov, entered into their minds; they had voluntarily taken up the role of unmurmuring, selfless servants of their "idol." The dullness of daily practical cares, the nights spent in copying out papers or translating books for the Professor, their utter renunciation of all personal pleasures, the wretched salary received by Uncle Vanya from Serebryakov—all this was sanctified in the eyes of Uncle Vanya and Sonya by their lofty purpose. They were inspired by the thought that in serving a scientist they served science, civilization, prog-

ress—in a word, the ruling principle. The professor was a "being of the sublime order" in their eyes.

Uncle Vanya is forty-seven, and a pauper. He has never known either rest or enjoyment.

And now that the best years of his life have already gone, his eyes are opened to the terrible truth. He sees that he has given up his best years, his youth, his entire self, to the service of a worthless being. He realizes that his former god is nothing but a pompous mediocrity, chock-full of pretensions and self-importance, "a dryasdust, a learned fossil." All this was seen with especial clarity when Serebryakov retired—"not a soul in the world has ever heard of him, he is utterly unknown; this means that for the last twenty-five years he has been occupying someone else's place." For twenty-five years he has been lecturing on art without understanding a thing about art, chewing the cud of other men's thought; for twenty-five years Uncle Vanya has been toiling in order to keep Professor Serebryakov in another man's place. Serebryakov, spoilt by easy success in his career, by the love of women, by the fact that Uncle Vanya and Sonya worked for him, is callous and selfish. During all these twenty-five years he never once so much as thanked Uncle Vanya, nor thought of raising his wretched salary by a single farthing.

And now he has come with his beautiful wife to settle down on the estate for good, for he has retired and cannot afford to live in the capital.

His arrival breaks up the accustomed routine of work on the estate. The Professor torments everyone with his whims, his gout, his callous selfishness. No one around him is allowed to think of anything but his welfare.

Uncle Vanya is in the painful situation of one who is driven to admit, on the threshold of old age, that he has lived in vain. If he had not sacrificed all his strength and talents to the serving of an "idol" he might have

done useful work and himself gained the gratitude of men. He might have been happy, have loved and been loved!

Thus begins Uncle Vanya's tragically delayed "rebellion." He seems to clamour for the restoring of his ruined life. He falls in love with the Professor's wife. For the first time in his life he begins to drink. He is oppressed by the thought that all is lost, his life ruined.

And the Professor contributes the last straw. He summons the household for a solemn conference and lays before them his latest project: to sell the estate so that, on the sum realized, he can live in the capital. He cannot stand country life, he is accustomed to the bustle of the city.

Uncle Vanya is astounded. It is not enough apparently that he had given up all his money, his very life to Serebryakov. Now, just when he is beginning to get old, he and Sonya, in gratitude for all they have done, are to be turned out of their home to shift for themselves.

Uncle Vanya's rebellion reaches its climax.

"You have ruined my life!" he shouts at Serebryakov. "I have never lived! Never! Thanks to you I destroyed, laid waste the best years of my life! You are my worst enemy!"

For all reply, the Professor flings in his face the word: "Nonentity!"

"My life has been wasted!" exclaims Uncle Vanya in despair. "I am gifted, clever, daring.... If I had had a normal life, I might have turned out a Schopenhauer, or a Dostoyevsky.... Oh, I don't know what I'm saying! I'm going mad...."

Uncle Vanya's words about the possibilities in his turning out a great man do not evoke an incredulous smile. During the three acts in which we have learned to know him, we have felt his intelligence, his ability to make sacrifices on behalf of what he considered the ruling prin-

Right to left: A. P. Chekhov, his wife, his sister and his mother

A. P Chekhov at Yalta, 1902

ciple in the name of science, progress and reason, regarding Serebryakov as the torch-bearer of these ideals. Familiar with Chekhov's characters, we are not surprised to discover once more *a great little man*.

Uncle Vanya's "rebellion" ends in his shooting at Serebryakov. After this climax, Uncle Vanya thinks of committing suicide, but, influenced by the affectionate and gentle Sonya, he returns to his work—work that will benefit Serebryakov.

After all that has happened, the Professor and his wife cannot go on living on the estate. They leave, not for the metropolis, it is true, but for Kharkov. A reconciliation of a sort is brought about, and Uncle Vanya tells Serebryakov that all will go on as formerly. The retired Professor will, as usual, receive all the profits.

Such is the story of a life given up to an "idol." Gorky was perfectly right when he discovered a symbolic meaning underlying it. How many such Uncle Vanyas, unassuming toilers, always in the background, have given their best for the sake of making some nonentity happy, of serving some false idol, convinced they were serving the "ruling principle," deceived by life! The spiritual beauty, the faith, the purity that have been spent in vain!

An old friend of Chekhov's, the Zemstvo doctor P. I. Kurkin (who, by the way, drew a map of the Serpukhov District like the one Astrov made in his own district), expressed this very well in a letter to the author, written the day after the first performance of *Uncle Vanya* at the Art Theatre:

"Your talent has brought to light the lives and the very souls of the simplest and most ordinary human beings. The streets are full of such people, and every one of them bears within him a particle of the existence you have described...." These words are valuable to us both as a just appraisal of the play and as evidence of the fact that contemporary playgoers saw in *Uncle*

Vanya the drama of a multitude of human beings, of the *mass* human being.

Whole life-stories pass before us in Chekhov's plays. The past, present and future of his characters, the development of their destinies and individualities, rise before us as in a novel. We ourselves can form in our imagination a perfectly clear artistic image of Vanya Voinitsky when he was a whole-hearted, straightforward, single-minded, serious and dreamy youth, an "idealist," as they used to say in those days. All the romantic aspirations of youth, all the yearnings after ideals and self-sacrifice of this young man had been centred on Professor Serebryakov, whom he regarded through the eyes of his sister, a poetically-minded girl who had reverently devoted her youth and purity to Serebryakov. The family have made a cult of Serebryakov. The years pass on the peaceful estate, years completely given up to the cult of the "great scientist," till the rapid development of events is unfolded in the play. And with the same clarity with which we see Voinitsky's past and present, we can imagine his wretched future, his old age, no longer gilded by dreams, illusion, or anything else.

A contemporary critic remarked that in "*Uncle Vanya* we have a symbol of the whole province, placing all its hopes in Professor Serebryakov, who turns out to be a learned fossil, a nonentity, battening on the province, smugly confident that he is its spiritual leader, its pride and hope, the only guarantee of a better life in store for it."

The character of Professor Serebryakov affords copious material for generalization. In him are debunked the idols of the intelligentsia of those times, the liberal "leaders of opinion," learned fossils, dry-as-dust, estranged from true Russian life, infatuated with themselves, scornful of ordinary people like Astrov and Voinitsky, dogmatic, convinced of their own high position as the

Elect, as brilliant personalities raised high above the "crowd."

The exposure of the appalling futility of serving the Elect, this typically Chekhov theme, is penetratingly and powerfully treated in *Uncle Vanya.* Even Uncle Vanya's rebellion is futile, for it is directed against a single individual, the same in whose service he has expended all his energies.

The theme of the fading, perishing beauty of life is the leit-motif of the play. All the chief *dramatis personae* are involved in it.

What is true beauty, and what is false beauty?

We know that in the opinion of Chekhov, as expressed through his characters, only work, creative work, is capable of creating human beauty.

No one before Gorky in world literature has ever been so much the inspired poet of work as Chekhov was. All his writings compose a song, now joyous, now sad, of work. To him work was the basis of all that was human, of all morals and aesthetics, and the theme of work was always bound up for him and his characters with the dream of free, creative toil. It will be remembered how Irina, the youngest of the three sisters, yearned for such work, and how life destroyed her dream. "Work without poetry, work without thoughts," she complains.

The poetry of work and the longing for such poetry—therein lies the secret charm of Chekhov's men and women.

All those Abogins, Princesses and such like, lack the true inner beauty, precisely because they are strangers to work, are hostile to the idea of work.

Here is what Uncle Vanya's friend, Dr. Astrov, says about Yelena Andreyevna, Serebryakov's wife:

"Everything about a human being should be beautiful: his face, his clothes, his soul, his mind. She is beautiful, there is no gainsaying that, but—she does nothing

but eat, sleep, walk about, charm us all with her beauty. She has no duties, others work for her . . . you know this is true. And a life of idleness cannot be a pure life."

And it is Astrov himself, strongly attracted by Yelena Andreyevna, who says this, that same Astrov, who, like so many other Chekhov characters, sets such a high value on beauty. "There is one thing that can still move me," he says, in explanation of his feeling for Yelena Andreyevna, "and that is beauty. I cannot be indifferent to it." And yet he senses something about her beauty which is offensive to his conception of beauty. He sees something impure in it. "I feel that if she cared to Yelena Andreyevna could turn my head in a single day. . . . But that's not real love, you know, not a lasting attachment. . . ."

False, impure beauty is incapable of inspiring deep human feeling.

Only that which serves creative effort is beautiful. Passionately enamoured of the loveliness of his native land, of its woods and orchards, and distressed by the rapacious way in which the forests were being felled, Astrov says: "I could understand it if, in place of these forests, high roads and railways were laid out, or factories and schools built—the people would then gain health, wealth and knowledge, but we see nothing of the sort! Everywhere swamps and mosquitoes, impassable roads, poverty, typhus, diphtheria, fires. . . . Almost everything has been destroyed, and nothing has been put up in its place."

Astrov grieves over the destruction of the beauty of the world, the beauty of human beings. He breaks off in the middle of an impassioned speech in which he tries to express his thoughts to Yelena Andreyevna, and says coldly: "But I can see by your face that I'm boring you."

A beautiful woman, she is incapable of feeling any interest in the theme nearest to Astrov, that of beauty of life. What, then, is her beauty? It is not quite the same

as the parasitical beauty of the various Abogins and Princesses. Yelena Andreyevna is profoundly unhappy herself, she made a mistake when she gave up her youth to Professor Serebryakov, moved not by spontaneous love or passion, but influenced by a purely intellectual feeling for one she believed to be a great and gifted scholar. Her life, too, has been swallowed up in the service of her idol. However that may be, she is perishing from boredom and spiritual vacuity, and, unable to create, can only destroy. Her very beauty becomes a travesty of true human beauty. That is why there is such an unmistakable tinge of cynicism and disrespect in the way Astrov makes love to her. If she and her husband had not gone away, there would undoubtedly have been an affair between her and Astrov, which would have left Astrov with nothing but a sense of devastation and futility.

"Yes, go," he tells her. (*Thoughtfully.*) "You seem to be a good kind of person, and yet there is something unaccountable in your whole being. You came here, you and your husband, and all those who had been working, busying themselves with getting things done, were obliged to leave their activities and devote themselves all the summer to your husband's gout, and to you. The two of you seem to have infected us all with your idleness. I let myself be carried away, did nothing for a whole month, and all the time people fell ill, and the peasants let the cattle run into my woods and thickets. . . . And so, wherever you and your husband go, you bring destruction with you . . . and I am sure, if you had stayed for good, the devastation would have been immense."

Estranged from work and creative effort, and therefore gradually becoming estranged from life itself, herself a wreck and the cause of devastation in others, Yelena Andreyevna, without realizing it, ruins everything beautiful, great, human which comes her way. She is a bird of prey without knowing it. She it is who destroys

the friendship which might have blossomed into love between Astrov and Sonya.

Astrov is a creative man on a big scale. Yelena Andreyevna justly estimates him in talking about him to Sonya:

"But, my dear, he's a genius! And do you know what that means? It means courage, a free mind, wide scope.... No sooner does he plant a tree than he begins thinking of how it will all be in a thousand years, and dreaming of the millennium.... It's true he drinks and is sometimes rude—but what of it? Just think of the life this doctor leads! Impassable mud on the roads, frost and blizzards, tremendous distances, the people coarse and half-savage, poverty and sickness all round—a man who has to work and struggle every day of his life in such circumstances cannot be expected always to be clean and sober by the age of forty...."

Astrov loves life; like all Chekhov's favourite characters he strains towards the future, longs to catch a glimpse of its face, to divine the aspect of the native land and mankind beneath the rays of the morrow's happiness. "As for my own personal life," he tells Sonya, "I swear there is absolutely nothing good to be said about it. When you are going through the woods on a dark night, and there's a light far ahead, you don't feel tired, you know, you don't notice it's dark, or that the twigs are scratching your face.... I work, as you know, like no one else in our district, life deals me constant blows, sometimes my sufferings are almost more than I can bear, and there is no light ahead. I expect nothing for myself...."

And yet there was a bright spot in his life: his friendship with Sonya and Uncle Vanya.

Sonya is in love with Astrov.

If it had not been for the incursion of Yelena Andreyevna into their life, he might have married Sonya. At

any rate, he would not have had to give up her friendship.

But Yelena Andreyevna must needs, "from sympathy," help the shy Sonya, and takes upon herself to speak to Astrov and find out if he loves Sonya. If he does not, so she reasons, let him stop his visits—it will be better for Sonya. Sonya hesitates: is the interview necessary, after all? For if he were to say "no," it would mean the end of all hope, and the end of their friendship, too. Would it not be better to leave herself at least hope? Astrov is the only bright spot in her life, so full of toil and care, the light seen in the distance in the dark, dark forest. . . .

She agrees, however, under the influence of Yelena Andreyevna, to allow her to speak to him.

Now why should Yelena Andreyevna want this conversation? The reason, though she may not be fully aware of it, is quite obvious: she is attracted by Astrov herself. The subtle, intelligent Astrov divines this.

"ASTROV: There's just one thing I cannot understand: What made you start this interrogation? (*Looking her straight in the eyes and shaking his finger at her.*) You're very deep, you know.

"YELENA ANDREYEVNA: What do you mean?

"ASTROV (*laughs*): Oh, you're very deep. Say Sonya suffers, I can readily believe that, but why this interrogation?. . . Now, don't look at me like that, sweet bird of prey. . . ."

Yes, she is a bird of prey, she has stolen Sonya's happiness by forcing Astrov to admit he does not love Sonya.

It was the very essence of the relations between Astrov and Sonya that they could not and should not be defined as yet. Yelena Andreyevna felt this and achieved "clarity," thereby spoiling all.

But though she destroyed another person's happiness, she could not create either her own or Astrov's. She

wrecks other people's lives just as senselessly and aimlessly as she drags her empty beauty, which is incapable of contributing to happiness, through life. Soulless, uninspired, unlovely beauty!

The leit-motif of the play—the destruction of beauty—reappears in many variations. Astrov himself, grieving over the wrecking of the beauty of life, is an image of wasted beauty.

Sonya begs him to give up vodka. "It does not suit you at all! You are so smart, your voice is so gentle.... I would say more—of all the people I know, you are the most exquisite. Why do you want to be like ordinary people who drink and play cards? Don't be, I implore you! You are always saying that people don't create anything, and only destroy what has been sent them from above. Why, why then must you destroy yourself?"

But the beauty of Astrov, his inner and outward harmony, are destroyed by life itself. In the final scene he says to Uncle Vanya:

"We're in a hopeless plight, you and I.... Those who live a hundred, or two hundred years after us, and who will despise us for having lived our lives so stupidly, with such lack of taste, may perhaps find a way to be happy themselves, but we.... That's it, friend. There used to be two decent intellectuals in our district—you and I. But in the short space of ten years a despicable philistine life has dragged us into itself; it has poisoned our blood with its rancid fumes, and we have become as vulgar as the rest...."

Much too severe a sentence. Neither Astrov nor Uncle Vanya had become philistines, living a complacent despicable life. But they have no beacon, they are faced by a great blank. We discern the traits of degeneration in Astrov. There are certain signs of decay about him. Alas, Astrov is not mistaken in the diagnosis of his state. It

really was a hopeless one. It could not be otherwise with a man who despised half-measures and philistinism, and was yet far from that revolutionary movement of the working class developing more and more in the nineties. Astrov, like his friend Voinitsky, was incapable of consoling himself with some trifling "saving" idea, with "small deeds," rosy illusions; nor could he acquire a lofty purpose in life, being too far removed from those who were waging the struggle for the purpose so dear to him—a rational, pure, just way of life. The tragedy of this Chekhov character was deepened by his political indifference, his limitations as an intellectual.

There is no doubt that Astrov would have preserved both his personality and his dream, and would have been able to cope with the vicissitudes of life, if he had been warmed by the consciousness that his modest labour was part of the general plan of reorganization, the re-creation of life. But he lacks this consciousness.

Serebryakov and Yelena Andreyevna take their departure. Astrov goes away, out of Sonya's life for ever. Uncle Vanya and Sonya are alone again. But a cardinal change has taken place in their life. Hope has gone out of it for ever.

"Well, it can't be helped, we must live," says Sonya. "We will go on living, Uncle Vanya. There is an endless procession of days, of long, long evenings before us, we will bear patiently all the trials fate sends us; we will work for others, now and when we are old, never resting, and when our hour comes, we will die without a murmur, and there, beyond the grave, we shall tell them that we suffered, that we wept, that we went through great bitterness, and God will have mercy on us, and you and I, dearest Uncle, will know a beautiful, bright, exquisite life.... We will rest! We will hear the angels singing, we will see the sky studded with diamonds, we will see all the world's evil, all our sufferings drowned in a

mercy filling the whole universe.... (*Wiping his eyes with her handkerchief.*) Poor Uncle Vanya, you're crying.... (*Speaking through her tears.*) You have never known joy, but wait, Uncle Vanya, you just wait.... We will rest.... (*Throwing her arms round him.*) We will rest!"

In the final scene of *Uncle Vanya* Chekhov managed to give expression to that beauty of human grief, which, as he said, "people will not soon learn to understand, still less to describe, and which, probably, can only be conveyed by music."

It would certainly be erroneous to think that Chekhov, with his hostility to religious emotions of any sort, sought comfort for his heroes in religion. But there was nothing else for Sonya to cling to, nothing with which she could try to comfort Uncle Vanya. And this makes the hopelessness of the dream of peace and joy for herself and Uncle Vanya all the more vivid. The wisdom of such a conclusion lies in the fact that the "bright, beautiful, exquisite" life referred to was exactly the life deserved by Sonya, Uncle Vanya, Astrov, and all the "little people," the toilers devoting their whole lives to the happiness of others....

And soaring above the hopeless life of these little, unimportant people, above the dark, cruel forces of destruction, is Chekhov's dream of life in the future, when everything about a human being would be beautiful! As always with Chekhov, the conception of beauty is blended with that of truth and creative effort: the aesthetic principle is merged with the ethical. Truth and work, those are the foundations, the ever-flowing sources of beauty. Life ought to be such as not to destroy the beauty of these great little individualities, not to allow the spiritual strength, the self-sacrifice, the selfless toil to be wasted in serving false gods, life in which it would be no longer the Serebryakovs who set the fashion, but the

Astrovs, Uncle Vanyas and Sonyas, adorning their native land with free, creative work.

Astrov's words that "everything about a human being should be beautiful: his face, his clothes, his soul, his mind," this formula of the indivisible unity of beauty and truth, were found in the notebook in which the heroic Komsomol girl Zoya Kosmodemyanskaya, barbarously tortured and hung by the German fascists, wrote down her most cherished maxims.

THE FAILURE OF *THE SEA-GULL*

The production of *The Sea-gull* on October 17, 1896, at the Alexandrinsky Theatre fell flat, notwithstanding the fact that the best members of the company including V. F. Komissarzhevskaya herself, who acted Nina Zarechnaya, were engaged.

The failure was partly due to chance causes. The well-known comic actress Levkeyeva, extremely popular among merchants, salesmen and petty officials, was to have chosen *The Sea-gull* for her benefit. But when the roles were being distributed it turned out there was no suitable one for Levkeyeva herself. Her faithful admirers, not knowing that their favourite was not in the play, filled the house. They had come to enjoy a light comedy by a humorous author, and the acting of a famous comedienne. At the beginning of the performance the public behaved as if they really were at a hilarious comedy, laughing in the most unexpected and unsuitable places, at the slightest provocation. Gradually it dawned on them that what was going on on the stage was not a side-splitting comedy, but something strange, unaccustomed and obscure. The leading actress kept holding forth about the "universal soul," "the devil who was father to eternal matter." And no Levkeyeva appeared. The audience began to regard it as an affront. There was trouble in the air. Indignant exclamations were heard, followed by whistles.

Chekhov, very pale, at first sat in the body of the hall, and later went backstage, but did not wait for the end of the performance. It had already become obvious that the play was a complete failure. The actors themselves were stunned and bewildered, and acted worse and worse as the evening went on. Even Komissarzhevskaya, on whom Chekhov had built all his hopes, acted badly. She went through her part dejectedly, with difficulty repressing her tears.

Everything seemed to conspire to make the play a failure. The audience might have been specially selected, consisting as it did of the most conservative elements, with reactionary, vulgar-philistine tastes.

And yet the true cause was a great deal deeper.

The theatre of the time was not up to the innovations inherent in Chekhov's plays. At its best it could merely reproduce the outward action and guess at the undercurrent of meaning. Speaking of his plays, Chekhov used to say that you must show life as it is and men as they are, on the stage. In real life people "do not shoot or hang themselves, do not make declarations of love every minute. Nor are they for ever uttering words of wisdom. They spend much more time eating, drinking, making love and talking nonsense. All this must be shown on the stage. A play ought to be written where people would come and go, dine, talk about the weather, play cards.... Let things be just as complex and at the same time as simple on the stage as they are in life. People sit down to their dinner, do nothing but eat their dinner, and in the meantime their happiness may be in the process of making, or their lives are being wrecked...."

As a matter of fact this is precisely what happens in the first act of *The Three Sisters*, where people are "just having breakfast," and their lives are being wrecked by an "uncouth beast," creeping into their household in the

person of Natasha, who played such a sinister role in the lives of the three sisters.

Everything the characters in Chekhov's plays say has an inner and an outer significance. On the surface people seem to be carrying on an ordinary conversation about everyday things, and yet every word they utter discloses the hidden musical theme, the profound relations between them, of which they themselves are sometimes unconscious. To produce Chekhov's plays on the stage without understanding this important quality in them would mean either to doom them to failure or rob them of their richness by showing their superficial side only.

Anton Pavlovich was greatly upset by the failure. After leaving the theatre he walked about the streets of Petersburg for the rest of the night. And the next day, to the surprise of his friends, and bidding no one good-bye, he went back to his Melikhovo estate.

The play, he wrote to V. I. Nemirovich-Danchenko, was a "terrific failure." "The theatre seemed to breathe malice, the air was heavy with hatred, and I, obeying a law of physics, burst out of Petersburg like a bomb."

"Even if I were to live another seven hundred years," he said, "I would not write a single other play for the theatre! Enough is enough. In this branch I have failed."

There was much hidden and cruel irony for Chekhov in the failure of his play, for in it is described the failure of a play by a misunderstood innovator. Chekhov seemed to have prophesied his own fate as a playwright.

What probably shook Chekhov more than the actual fact of his failure was the malicious pleasure many of his so-called friends seemed to take in it.

"... Most of my plays have failed," he wrote, "and it never seemed to affect me. But on the 17th of October it was not my play which failed, it was my personality. During the very first act I was surprised by a certain strange phenomenon: those with whom, up till the 17th, I

had been on a frank and friendly footing, people I had dined gaily with, on whose behalf I had broken lances ... all these people had a funny expression on their faces, very funny.... In a word, their behaviour was such as to give Leikin cause to condole with me by post for having so few friends, and *Nedelya* to ask: 'What has Chekhov done to them?' I have calmed down by now, I am myself again, but I cannot forget what happened, any more than I could forget if someone were to strike me."

The failure of *The Sea-gull* emphasized the fact that Chekhov had always had to work in a hostile atmosphere, and that hydra-headed philistinism, the literary-theatrical species included, had always hated him. "What has Chekhov done to them?" He was a thorn in their side by virtue of his entire work. And now this philistinism was avenging itself as it alone can: by a coarse, vulgar row, by slander and persecution.

Chekhov soon took himself in hand, as he always knew how to, and returned to his working routine.

We know that these years marked a creative peak for him. Soon after the failure of *The Sea-gull* he came out with such masterpieces as *The Muzhiks*, *In the Cart*, *Visiting Friends*. His genius soared higher and higher, never succumbing to grief and disaster.

But the failure of *The Sea-gull* had a fatal effect upon his health. "From that moment his disease took a turn for the worse," declares his brother, Mikhail Chekhov.

Up till then it had still been possible to shake off the thought of ill health, to put it aside. But now the disease forced itself into Chekhov's life, imperiously, inexorably. From now on, to the end of his life, he was a real invalid. The last eight years of his life were darkened by the tragic contrast between his physical and mental state—his spiritual, social and political consciousness, his feeling for life, his creative work, soaring ever higher, the fatal course of his disease becoming more and more rapid.

One day in March 1897, while Chekhov was lunching in the Hermitage Restaurant with Suvorin, just arrived in Moscow, Anton Pavlovich had a sudden haemorrhage. He was removed then and there to Suvorin's hotel bedroom where he lay for almost two days. He remarked that "the blood flows from the right lung, just as it did in the case of my brother and a female relative of mine who also died of consumption."

Another haemorrhage followed soon after. Anton Pavlovich was obliged to spend two weeks in Professor Ostroumov's clinic.

It was found that the inflammation was localized in the apex of his lung. The doctors prescribed a radical change in his regime and complete abstention from work demanding concentration, and advised him to go to the Riviera, to Nice. Here, in the south of France, he lived from the autumn of 1897 to the spring of 1898.

THE DREYFUS CASE

The burning topic of the day in France, and indeed throughout the world, just then, was the notorious Dreyfus case.

The Jew, Alfred Dreyfus, an artillery captain attached to the French General Staff, was accused of participation in espionage. The whole case was concocted by the reactionary military clique. The accusation was utterly groundless. Nevertheless the court martial degraded him to the ranks and sentenced him to exile for life.

The documents produced by the Minister for War which were supposed to incriminate Dreyfus were never shown either to the accused himself, or to his defence. It was Major Esterhazy and not Dreyfus who committed high treason.

The cynical nature of the court proceedings, the sentencing of an obviously innocent person, caused a burst of indignation throughout Europe. The struggle, of which the Dreyfus case was the centre, turned into an acute conflict between two distinct camps—the clerical-reactionary, and the progressive. Zola came out with his famous article "J'accuse" in defence of Dreyfus. This was a formidable attack against the ruling party in the country, against all the forces of reaction. Zola proved that the French General Staff, the Minister for War, and the Court were guilty of premeditated falsehood and slander.

Zola was accused of contempt of Court and tried. But the proceedings proved unfavourable to the reactionary party. During the trial it became quite obvious that the documents on which the accusation of Dreyfus had been founded were forgeries. It was also established who it was that had been guilty of the forgeries.

The Dreyfus case had to be looked into once more. Dreyfus was brought back from exile and towards the end of 1899 he was tried a second time. The reactionary camp, to save their faces, insisted on Dreyfus being again pronounced guilty, though this time "recommended for mercy." And the President "pardoned" him.

Anton Pavlovich did not restrict himself to following the course of all these events attentively but, with characteristic thoroughness, painstakingly studied the stenographic report of the trial, and came to the inevitable conclusion that Dreyfus was innocent. The behaviour of the reactionary camp, both in France and Russia, persecuting not only Dreyfus, but Zola, too, inspired Chekhov with disgust. The reactionary press, including Suvorin's *Novoye Vremya*, did all in their power to blacken Zola's reputation. The *Novoye Vremya* accused all those who spoke up for Dreyfus of being in the pay of a "Jewish Syndicate."

Zola's courage and integrity delighted Chekhov. "Zola has added several inches to his height," wrote Chekhov from Nice, "his letters of protest are like a fresh breeze, and every Frenchman must feel that there is still justice in the world, thank God, and that if an innocent man is accused, there are people to stick up for him."

Chekhov had broken with Suvorin's paper as early as 1893. And now the time had come to put an end to his friendly relations with Suvorin. It was impossible for Suvorin to pretend that he had "nothing to do" with the persecution of Zola and Dreyfus in the columns of his paper and Chekhov had long shaken off the political in-

nocence which had once enabled him to keep Suvorin separate from *Novoye Vremya* in his mind. He no longer regarded Suvorin as simply a man of letters; at last he saw him for what he really was—an unprincipled reactionary political schemer. And so, despite the years of intimacy that had subsisted between them, Chekhov decided to break off relations with Suvorin entirely. He wrote him a long letter confirming the finality of the rupture with "the old man." He wrote that the Dreyfus case had been "brewed" on the soil of anti-Semitism, "a soil which reeks of the slaughter-house," and hinted at the "unsavoury old age" of Suvorin, contrasting it with the purity of Zola's. "Whatever the verdict," wrote Chekhov, "Zola will feel joy when the trial is over, his old age will be a happy one, and he will die with a perfectly clear conscience, or at least with a relieved conscience."

This was a body blow at Suvorin, whose conscience was always uneasy.

In a letter to his brother Alexander, expressing indignation at the false information supplied to *Novoye Vremya* by its correspondents, Chekhov writes: "Whatever you say, *Novoye Vremya* makes a disgusting impression. The dispatches from Paris cannot be read without nausea, they are not dispatches but sheer forgeries and swindles. And the articles of that self-congratulatory Ivanov! And the denunciations of that loathsome 'Man from Petersburg'! . . . It's not a newspaper, it's a menagerie, a pack of famished jackals snapping at one another's tails—God knows what it is!"

Suvorin, who, of course, understood perfectly that his intimacy with Chekhov had come to an end, nevertheless kept up a pretence that everything was as before, and though they still kept up a correspondence, not a trace of the old relations remained.

The break with Suvorin cannot be regarded as a momentous incident in Chekhov's life, for the way to it had been gradually led up to. Anton Pavlovich had long realized that Suvorin could not be regarded as apart from his paper. But such a decision, such clear political appraisal are characteristic of Chekhov at this period.

He followed with ever-growing keenness and agitation the course of Russian political life, eagerly marking every progressive trend in it.

ENCOUNTER WITH THE ART THEATRE

One of the signs of pre-revolutionary social stirrings was the founding in 1898 by two distinguished men in the world of the theatre—K. S. Stanislavsky and V. I. Nemirovich-Danchenko—of the Moscow Popular Art Theatre, as it was then called. The new theatre was destined to revolutionize the theatre in Russia and throughout the world, and to become the pride of the Russian people.

The word "popular" was added to stress the democratic tendency of the theatre. This tendency was displayed first and foremost in the style of the theatre's productions, in the method of portraying life on the stage. It was inevitable that Chekhov's path and that of the Art Theatre should converge: a Russian progressive theatre, full of creative energy, courage, innovatory audacity, and a great Russian democratic writer, an innovator in the spirit and in the style of his work. Both the writer and the theatre expressed the rising creative forces of a nation.

The successful and fortunate result of the historical rapprochement between Chekhov and the Art Theatre was that the theatre was enabled to grasp some highly important points of Chekhov's style and aesthetic system, divining some of its most vital principles, including the theory of the "hidden" beauty of the ordinary. K. S. Stanislavsky and V. I. Nemirovich-Danchenko applied the Chekhov principle to the stage, introducing a new conception which they called the *undercurrent*. This

meant the ability to discover the beauty of the ordinary, to bring out the invisible beauty concealed in every word, gesture and action. The Art Theatre understood that in order to produce Chekhov's plays they would have to disclose the concealed, secret life and drama underlying ordinary actions and conversations about everyday occurrences. Thus the Russian stage and drama enriched and deepened the artistic portrayal of actual life to an unprecedented extent.

The Chekhov principle, of which he wrote in a letter to Gorky that "in each character must be felt *the mass of humanity*, the background from which he springs," merged with one of the most important artistic principles of the Art Theatre, the principle to which Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko devoted so much of their energies—that of the *ensemble*. Every part in a play, even if it consists merely of a few words, should be an authentic artistic image, with its own "undercurrent." Even if the actor has no more than three or four words to speak, he must put into those few words such depth, significance and perfection as to enable the spectator to imagine the entire life of the character, his disposition, his habits, his attitude to everything going on on the stage.

In these creative aspirations of the new theatre the same democratic tendencies, the same intuitive penetration into the life of the little man, the inner significance of the ordinary and everyday, made themselves felt. The actor's ability to listen to others, to feel what others feel, to concentrate on what is going on on the stage, was regarded in the Art Theatre as no less important than his ability to perform his own individual role, or, to be more precise, it was considered impossible to create a role without this ability of merging it in the action of the whole play. The Art Theatre persistently strove to reach a point at which the interrelation of all the actors in a play should be felt in every detail, so that every word

and gesture of every character influenced in one way or another all the rest of the cast. The mass, ensemble principle helped the theatre to render the movement of actual life, and not merely create vivid isolated images. The Art Theatre strove to give the audience a sensation of the course of life itself, in which individual characters were merely particles.

All this does not mean, of course, that there were no differences of opinion between Chekhov and the Art Theatre.

But the Art Theatre made Chekhov want to write for the stage, and greatly stimulated the steadily rising enthusiasm which the writer was then experiencing.

Chekhov's close relations with the Art Theatre began as a result of the theatre's decision to revive *The Sea-gull* after its spectacular flop. Chekhov hesitated long before he yielded to the insistent requests of Nemirovich-Danchenko and allowed the theatre to produce this play. The theatre itself was by no means easy about it. On the 14th of October, 1898, the Art Theatre opened with a performance of *Tsar Fyodor Ioannovich*, and on the 17th of December of the same year the first performance of *The Sea-gull* was given. This performance was to decide the fate of the theatre. *Tsar Fyodor Ioannovich* was a success, but the productions following it had a languid reception, the theatre was still feeling its way. *The Sea-gull* was a kind of manifesto, in which the theatre for the first time realized its aspirations and stated its artistic outlook.

There was another and serious cause for uneasiness. For *The Sea-gull* to be a failure this time would have been a blow for Chekhov with the most serious consequences to his health.

But the success of the performance exceeded all expectations. By the end of the first act there could be no doubt about it. True, for a moment, after the end of the act, the cast thought their worst apprehensions were realized: the audience was silent....

This is how Stanislavsky describes it:

"We moved in silence towards the wings. And at that moment the audience broke out into a roar of applause. We hastened to lower the curtain.... The public was raving, while on the stage everyone fell to embracing one another, including outsiders, who rushed into the wings."

Thus, at last, after so much suffering, *The Sea-gull* triumphed. Now the symbolism of the play was revealed in quite a different aspect. A play about the triumph of creative effort brought triumph to the creative efforts of the innovators, brought a new theatre into existence, a theatre of new ideas and dramatic forms. And every time we see the emblem of a sea-gull on the modest curtain of the Art Theatre, we cannot help feeling moved.

The Sea-gull, which from the first was closely bound up with Chekhov's personal life, became interwoven with an event of great importance for himself. In September 1898, during a rehearsal of *The Sea-gull*, Anton Pavlovich made the acquaintance of his future wife, O. L. Knipper. Shortly after that he attended a rehearsal of *Tsar Fyodor Ioannovich*. "I was really touched," he wrote in a letter, "by the cultured tone of it all, I felt the breath of true art wafted from the stage, though the actors themselves were no geniuses. I think Irina was brilliant. Her voice, nobility, sincerity—so wonderful, it makes you want to cry.... If I stayed in Moscow I should be sure to fall in love with this Irina."

"This Irina" was acted by Olga Leonardovna Knipper.

A great love came into the life of Anton Pavlovich, in an atmosphere of beauty and eager expectation of the triumph of art.

And just then he was obliged to leave Moscow and Melikhovo. The doctors insisted on his removal to the South, to the Crimea.

YALTA

Melikhovo was to be sold. For some time the Chekhov family hesitated. There were so many associations bound up with the estate.

But just then, in October 1898, Pavel Yegorovich, the father of the family, died, and Melikhovo seemed a void without him.

The idea of settling in Yalta was not congenial to Chekhov. He had never liked the place. As far back as 1888, he wrote to his sister on arriving there:

"Yalta is a kind of mixture of a European health resort reminiscent of views of Nice and a small town fair. Box-like hotels in which wretched consumptives languish, the faces of wealthy idlers in pursuit of cheap adventures, a smell of scent drowning the smell of the sea and the cypresses, a wretched, dirty landing-stage, melancholy lights far out at sea, the prattle of young ladies and their swains who have come here to enjoy nature, of which they understand nothing—it all makes such a dreary impression. . . ."

It was the bourgeois vulgarity of Yalta, and not the Crimean landscape which repelled Chekhov. But nature can only be enjoyed for a month or two there, and it was among the landscapes of Central Russia, where he felt he belonged, that Chekhov wanted to live.

Disgust for the Yalta atmosphere, for the bad taste and arrogance of the bourgeois crowd with their dressiness and boredom, longings for the woman he loved,

whom, even after they were married, he could only meet for brief periods, either when she came to him in Yalta, or when a short-lived improvement in his health enabled him to go to Moscow, his longings for his beloved theatre and no less beloved Moscow, for Petersburg, his feeling of isolation and loneliness, particularly irksome at a time of social stirrings in which Chekhov would have liked to take part himself, which he wanted to know all about, made life in Yalta intolerable. Anton Pavlovich called Yalta his "warm Siberia," his "Devil's Island."

It was a great joy to him when the Art Theatre came to the Crimea. Before this visit Chekhov's only knowledge of the theatre had been gained by his attendance at a few rehearsals, and a performance of *The Sea-gull* given for his special benefit in the building of another theatre, when, after the season was over, he came to Moscow for a short stay. This time the theatre came with a large repertoire, in which *Uncle Vanya* was included.

"This was the springtime of our theatre," wrote Stanislavsky, "the most fragrant and joyous period of its young life.... We decided: since Anton Pavlovich cannot come to us, for he is ill, we will go to him, for we are well. If Mahomet will not go to the mountain, the mountain must go to Mahomet...."

It was the most fragrant and joyous spring in the life of Anton Pavlovich, too. Sick and lonely on his "Devil's Island," he was suddenly visited by the theatre which had given such sublime interpretations of *Uncle Vanya* and *The Sea-gull*, a theatre full of youthful energy and faith in the future! This spring Chekhov bound up his life with that of O. L. Knipper.

"Almost the entire literary world" was in Yalta at the time—Gorky, Mamin-Sibiryak, Kuprin, Bunin, Stanyukovich, Yelpatyevsky, Chirikov.

"Every day," recalls Stanislavsky, "at a certain hour, all the actors and writers gathered at the house of Che-

khov, who invited his guests to lunch. The sister of Anton Pavlovich, Marya Pavlovna, who was a general favourite, played the hostess. The head of the table was taken by his mother, a charming old lady whom we all loved. . . ."

Chekhov had built his house (the "White Cottage," the local residents called it) in Autka, just outside Yalta, and there he had laid out a garden. In addition to this he had purchased a small estate, Kuchuk-Koy, some twenty five miles from the town.

One of the reasons why Chekhov could not bear to live in Yalta itself was the depressing contrast between the idle luxury of the vulgar rich and the appalling poverty of the impecunions consumptives. He tried to help the many honest toilers who came there in hopes of regaining their health.

"How often," writes Gorky, "I would hear from him:

" 'There's a school-teacher here ... ill, married—do you think you could help him in any way? I've arranged things for him temporarily. . . .'

"Once he invited me to his country-house in Kuchuk-Koy, where he had a little plot of land and a white two-storeyed house. He showed me over the 'estate,' talking eagerly:

" 'If I had plenty of money I would build a sanatorium for consumptive village school-teachers. I would build ever such a sunny house, full of light, with big windows and high ceilings. There'd be a wonderful library, and all sorts of musical insturments, beehives, a vegetable garden, an orchard; lectures on agriculture and meteorology could be organized; a teacher ought to know everything, old chap, everything!' "

The "White Cottage" in Yalta attracted people from all over Russia, among them many of the "little men," who crossed the threshold of Chekhov's house with awe and veneration. Anton Pavlovich possessed the art of making people feel at ease and quickly regain their nat-

ural simplicity, and when they left him, it was with a feeling they had been with someone who *understood.*

While Russia and other countries were ringing with his fame, his feeling of dissatisfaction with his own work was growing more and more acute. In answer to his wife's complaint that he never told her anything about his writing, he said that "there was nothing new or interesting about it. I write, then I read it over and see that it has all been said before, that it's old stuff. And what is needed, I feel, is something new, pungent. . . ."

This was more than his customary dissatisfaction with himself as an author; it was the feeling that his country was embarking on a new stage of life, and a desire to say his word about the new great developments which he felt were maturing within the country. He wrote to Gorky: "I know little, next to nothing, as befits a Russ dwelling among Tartars, but I have great presentiments."

"With what pleasure," he says in a letter to the famous Russian actress Komissarzhevskaya, "I would now return to civilized parts, to Petersburg, for instance, to live there for a while, and knock about. Here I feel as if I were not living, but falling asleep, or drifting somewhere, never stopping, helpless, like a balloon."

He even considered that the climate of the Moscow province suited him better than that of the Crimea. Some of his doctors, Professor Ostroumov, for instance, in whose clinic Chekhov had lain in 1897, were of the same opinion.

His disease was carrying him away, despite his zest for life, now stronger than ever.

His last years were brightened by friendship with Lev Tolstoi and Gorky. In the autumn of 1901 Tolstoi went to Gaspra to recuperate after an attack of pneumonia. Chekhov was a frequent visitor there. According to Gorky, "Lev Nikolayevich was fond of Chekhov, and whenever he looked at him his eyes became almost tender, and his

glance seemed to caress Anton Pavlovich's face. Once Anton Pavlovich was walking along a path in the park.... Tolstoi, still an invalid, sitting in an arm-chair on the verandah, seemed to yearn towards him and said under his breath:

" 'What a charming, fine person he is! As modest and gentle, as a girl! He even walks like a girl, he's simply wonderful!' "

Gorky's own feelings for Chekhov were saturated with so much of tenderness, of passionate delight, of admiration for all that went on within Chekhov's soul, for his entire personality, that they can only be described as a joyous veneration and gratitude for the existence of such a wonderful person. Chekhov was very fond of Gorky, too, he was among the first to appreciate him, and he foretold that Gorky would became "a tremendous writer." They had much in common, above all, the respect each felt for work, intellect and culture.

Gorky said he had never met a man "who felt the significance of work in all its aspects, as a foundation for culture, so profoundly as Anton Pavlovich did." He notes that this attitude made itself felt "in every detail of Chekhov's home life, in the things which surrounded him, in his choice of household objects, and in his love for these—a noble love, having nothing in common with the desire to accumulate, and merging into unceasing admiration for them as the product of human creative effort. He liked constructive work, laying out gardens, beautifying the earth, he felt the poetry of work. With what touching care he watched the growth of the fruit trees and bushes he planted! When his house at Autka was being built, he said:

"If everybody did all he could on the plot of land belonging to him, how beautiful our planet would be."

Gorky and Chekhov found the hidden, sacred paths to one another's souls. In the whole history of literature no

one has felt the poetry of labour so profoundly as Gorky and Chekhov. In both was expressed the extraordinary diligence of the Russian people. The belief that these people would create in their native land a life worthy of their own greatness drew Gorky and Chekhov together.

Gorky, grasped the most important, fundamental features of Chekhov as man and author. He rightly understood Chekhov's inner strength and powerful will.

"In his pensive grey eyes," wrote Gorky, "there almost always lurked a gentle and subtle irony, and sometimes those eyes became cold, sharp, almost cruel; at such moments a harsh note would sound in his expressive, kindly voice, and it would strike me that this modest, gentle man could, if he found it necessary, stand up against what was hostile to him, and never lose ground."

In this connection it is interesting to remember how another intuitive artist—the painter Repin—also saw Chekhov as a strong, virile character:

"A subtle, inexorable and purely Russian power of analysis shone in his eyes and was the prevailing expression of his face. A foe to sentimentality and exaggerated enthusiasm, he seemed to use a kind of cold irony as a curb on himself and to enjoy the feeling of the self-imposed armour of severity that he wore.

"To me he seemed a tower of strength, both physically and morally. . . ."

The thoughts Anton Pavlovich imparted to Gorky show Chekhov's attitude to his own characters—an attitude which is at the same time affectionate, melancholy and ironical. "We all hope," he said to Gorky, "that life will be better 'in two hundred years,' but no one bothers about making it better tomorrow."

Anton Pavlovich sympathized with those of his heroes who dreamed of a glorious future, at the same time treating them with irony, smiling his gentle, wise smile at

the passivity of their dreams, at their inability to struggle for their realization.

The name of Gorky is connected with a manifestation of a serious event of a political nature on the part of Chekhov—his protest against Gorky's expulsion from the body of Honorary Academicians. Together with the famous playwright Sukhovo-Kobylin (author of *The Marriage of Krechinsky*, *The Case*, and *The Death of Tarelkin*), Gorky was elected an honorary academician in the department of *belles-lettres* in February 1902. Lev Tolstoi, Chekhov, Korolenko and the poet Zhemchuzhnikov had been elected honorary academicians in April 1899, when, in honour of the centenary of Pushkin's birth, a department of *belles-lettres* was established at the Academy of Science.

The election of Gorky, that stormy petrel of the revolution, caused indignant surprise in ruling circles. Tsar Nikolai II wrote over the announcement of Gorky's election: "Highly original."

Grand Duke Constantine, President of the Academy, was ordered to concoct an official statement on behalf of the Academy, making the election of Gorky invalid on the grounds that the Academy had not known that Gorky was under judicial examination on a political charge.

Thus the Academy had to eat dirt in public. Two members of the Academy were however found who would not consent to servile silence. Needless to say these were Chekhov and Korolenko. Both sent in their resignation to the Academy in token of protest. In the statement he addressed to the President, Chekhov made it perfectly clear that he did not consider the charge of political disloyalty a sufficient ground for declaring elections invalid.

Chekhov's name became more and more associated in the minds of the advanced public in Russia with the growth of the progressive social trend, becoming as it

were a symbol of this same trend. Anton Pavlovich began to feel that he was loved by those on whose behalf he was working. He was profoundly moved by telegrams sent him by the Pirogov congress of doctors participating in social work. The Art Theatre gave a special performance of *Uncle Vanya* (a play in which the author and one of the chief characters were doctors) for this congress. Anton Pavlovich was greatly excited about it. "Be sure to tell me," he wrote to his wife, "how the performance for the doctors goes off. I read somewhere that the doctors mean to give a dinner to the company in token of their gratitude. Is that true? Mind you, act your very best. . . ."

The play made a tremendous impression on the doctors. Among the delegates to the congress there were many who recognized themselves in the Zemstvo doctor, Astrov, and found his tragic fate very like their own. Sobs were heard in the house. Anton Pavlovich received several telegrams from the congress. One of them ran: "Zemstvo doctors from remote parts of Russia, having seen the work of a doctor and artist performed on the stage, greet their colleague and will never forget the 11th of January." Chekhov replied to one of the delegates: "I felt like a king during the congress, the telegrams raised me to heights I never dreamed of." To another delegate he said: "I never expected such honours, and never could expect them; and receive the reward with joy, though I realize it is above my deserts."

BEFORE THE STORM

Chekhov's prevailing mood of that period—which may be summed up as the expectation of revolution in the near future—found its expression in *The Three Sisters* (1901). One of the characters in the play utters the prophetic words: "The time has come, something great is approaching us, a good, strong storm is coming nearer and nearer, and will soon blow away all laziness, indifference, prejudice against work, putrid boredom, from our society... Twenty-five or thirty years hence everyone will be working. Everyone!"

Chekhov felt the breath of the coming storm. It was not for nothing that the reactionary critics, enraged by Chekhov's enormous popularity after his death, tried to explain it away by saying that Chekhov was one of the "Stormy Petrels."

The writer Yelpatyevsky writes of Chekhov in the early years of the twentieth century:

"The time came when there was nothing left of the Chekhov of the former years.... It happened so suddenly, I was completely unprepared for the change. The stormy wave of the Russian revolution lifted Chekhov and bore him aloft. He who had always turned away from politics, now threw himself into politics, he read the papers in a different way, and read things in them he used not to read. The pessimistic or, at any rate, the sceptical Chekhov had become a believer. And he believed, not that in

two hundred years life would be good, as many of his characters predicted, but that this good life, this bright future for Russia was close at hand, he believed that the revival which would make Russia a new, bright, joyous country would begin any moment....

"His entire personality seemed to be changed—he was always animated and excited now, his very gestures were different, a new note sounded in his voice.

"I remember once, when I came back from Petersburg* at a time when the town was seething with excitement on the eve of the revolution of 1905, how Chekhov rang me up on that very day, and insisted impatiently on my coming to him as soon as possible, that very minute, for he wanted to speak to me about some important, urgent business. It turned out that this important and urgent business was nothing more than his eager desire to know immediately what was going on in Moscow and Petersburg, and not merely in the literary circles, which used to interest him to the exclusion of everything else, but in the political world, the growing revolutionary movement. And when I, not sharing his illusions about what was going on at the time, sounded a sceptical note, he grew excited and countered my remarks with harsh, peremptory retorts, quite unlike the usual Chekhov style.

" 'How can you say such things!' he cried angrily. 'Don't you see everything from top to bottom has begun to move! Society, the workers!'

"... Chekhov, usually so reticent about his own writing, suddenly handed me a manuscript:

" 'I've just finished it.... I would like you to read it.'

"I read it. It was *The Bride*, in which a new note, lacking the Chekhov despondency, was sounded. It was obvious to me that a great change had come over Chekhov,

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* The writer Yelpatyevsky was a Yalta resident and held a practice as doctor.—*Ed.*

over his artistic perceptions, and that a new period in his writing was beginning.

"But this period was not doomed to develop. Soon after, Chekhov died."

Another contemporary writer, V. Veresayev, bears witness to the same thing:

"I was surprised at the acute interest displayed by Chekhov in social and political questions. I had been told that ... Chekhov was profoundly indifferent to politics.... The fact that he was able to be on intimate terms with a man like Suvorin, editor of *Novoye Vremya*, was eloquent enough. But this was a different man, evidently the revolutionary electricity, with which the atmosphere was overcharged at the time, had roused him, too."

From a letter written by Gorky to V. Posse, we can judge of Chekhov's frame of mind during the years 1900 and 1901. In this letter Gorky mentions Chekhov saying to him: "I feel that one should write differently, and about different things, for a different reader—one who is severe and honest."

As we know, the realization of the necessity for active struggle against the evils of reaction had come to Chekhov as far back as the nineties. It was in connection with this attitude that he began to feel such disgust for weakness and irresolution, such a longing for action, for people capable of struggle.

Thoughts and moods of this kind grew in power and tensity during the years directly preceding the revolution. Never before had he longed so keenly for people capable of waging a struggle, never before had he been so severe on flabbiness, on the discrepancy between word and deed and other shortcomings of the intellectuals of his day.

The louder the note of the imminent storm sounded in his writings, the harsher grew his irony for those who indulge in beautiful dreams of "life becoming better in two hundred years," incapable of struggling "for this

better life to begin tomorrow." He chose the most unexpected and varied forms for the expression of this ruthless and rueful irony of his. He boldly combined the dramatic element with the comic in his plays. His two latest plays—*The Three Sisters* and *The Cherry Orchard*—are marked by a brilliant combination of the dramatic and the comic.

This combination sprang from Chekhov's feeling that the *old life was coming to an end.* The purifying storm, which is to sweep away the curse of the past from Chekhov's native land, is near, it is coming! And the artist feels his right, historically speaking, to mock at the dramas of the old life. Nevertheless, they are dramas. But now, as in the story *Visiting Friends*, Chekhov regards these dramas from the standpoint of the future; and the absurdity, the hopelessness, the historical incongruity of the old forms of life is obvious to him.

Chekhov feels hurt for his heroes, who can do nothing but *talk* of the coming storm and the happy, beautiful life ahead, and do not know the way to struggle, the way to that very future. He invites them to seek these paths, laughs at their weakness.

Of *The Three Sisters* Chekhov said it was a light comedy he was writing. V. I. Nemirovich-Danchenko tells us Chekhov stressed this with the utmost insistency, but K. S. Stanislavsky says that after the reading of the play to the actors of the Art Theatre, Chekhov was sincerely puzzled, in the discussion that followed, to hear some of the actors call it a drama, and others a tragedy. At last he lost his temper and left the theatre unnoticed.

"After the discussion was over," says Stanislavsky, "I rushed to Chekhov's apartment, where I found him not only upset and hurt, but actually angry, which he seldom was.... It turned out the playwright thought he had written a gay comedy, and the listeners took it for a drama and wept."

But after all, Chekhov himself wrote the words "a drama" beneath the title of *The Three Sisters*, whereas *The Cherry Orchard* he actually defined as "a comedy." It must therefore be assumed that what hurt Chekhov was the fact that his audience saw only the dramatic side of the play and missed the comic, that they did not realize its most characteristic and important feature—the combination of drama and comedy.

The dramatic theme of *The Three Sisters*—beauty wasting away in vain—is the same as that underlying *The Steppe* and *Uncle Vanya*. How much spiritual richness, eagerness for selfless work, responsiveness to all that is good in life and people, ready intuition, kindness, subtle intellectuality, passionate desire for a pure, graceful, humane life, and for happiness there is in those wonderful women, the three sisters!

And all this finds neither response nor application. Actual life, vulgar, coarse and revolting, closes down upon the helpless sisters; "work without poetry, without thought" eats up the youth of Irina and Olga, and their impulse to joy, meeting with no answering impulse, flickers out. Life, like a weed, strangles beauty.

But there are other themes, ironical, "farcical" ones, interwoven in the drama.

The characters in *The Three Sisters* dream much of the future life, and there is beauty and reason in their dreams. Vershinin is eloquent on the subject. But what a contrast between the bold, sweeping scope of his dreams, and his inertia—his whole life, held in the vice of trivial misfortune! He tells everyone about his wife, a vulgar hysterical woman, always on the verge of suicide, and about his unfortunate little girls. His helplessness and eccentricity rob him of greatness, bringing him down to the level of those "hundred-and-one misfortunes" which make Yepikhodov in *The Cherry Orchard* such a comic character.

The comic, farcical element in *The Three Sisters* springs from this contrast between the boldness of the dream and the timidity of the dreamers. The very abundance of these dreamy conversations about the future, unaccompanied as they are by any effort to struggle for it, is strongly suggestive of such characters as Oblomov (Goncharov—*Oblomov*) and Manilov (Gogol—*Dead Souls*).

Chekhov, with his clear, well-balanced mind, his love for action and dislike for mere words, felt more acutely than ever, on the eve of the great tempest, the isolation from the real struggle for the future of people like Vershinin, the melancholy irony of their position.

Chekhov's love of his favourite characters, pure and honest men and women, was mingled with an apologetic awareness of their lack of strength, both in love and hatred, their inability "to build up their lives themselves," as V. I. Nemirovich-Danchenko put it. That is why Chekhov seems to modify the tragic element of the play with the introduction of the comic, he seems to doubt his heroes, not sure whether they are serious enough for a drama.

Both Chekhov's shy love for his characters and the sense of responsibility towards his country and his people, ever present in him, but heightened now, *on the eve of the storm*, make themselves felt in the modest reserve with which he "admits" the right of these characters to participate in drama. While, in the cases of Astrov and Uncle Vanya, Chekhov did not even have to ask whether they "merited" a dramatic rendering, in that of Vershinin this question could not be repressed. When times change, the songs change too. Men like Vershinin are not often the prey to tragic despair. Chekhov felt there *was* a way out, and that it lay through *struggle*. And although neither his characters nor he himself knew how to set about it, they realized that inaction, passive dream-

ing were unpardonable now that somebody strong and brave was getting ready for "a great and powerful storm." Those who do not feel the irony which underlies *The Three Sisters* are incapable of understanding the profundity and penetration of Chekhov's criticism of the shortcomings and weaknesses of the intelligentsia of those days.

There are characters in which the satirical element is stronger than the dramatic; such, for instance, is the old army surgeon Chebutykin. He is so detached from reality that he becomes a caricature; he himself feels that he is shadowy, unreal. Drunk or sober, his constant refrain is:

"We do not exist, nothing in the world exists, we are nothing, we only think we exist."

This is one of the profound and significant themes underlying the play, in which is expressed Chekhov's longing for action, for the true struggle; without social activity there can be nothing but talking and dreaming, and mere dreams do not prove that we have our existence in the life of the epoch.

The influence of a new, powerful, decisive force—the working class of Russia, getting ready to take the destiny of the country into their own hands—was making itself felt in all aspects of life: Indirectly this influence made itself felt with great force in Chekhov's writing, too—keying up his critical attitude towards the weaknesses of the honest, hard-working, but socially passive and flabby intellectuals. Chebutykin's "we do not exist, we only think we do" applies to all those dreamers who were incapable of doing anything towards the realization of their dreams.

There is a strong touch of satire in the drawing of the character of Andrei Prozorov, the brother of the three sisters. His sisters were sure he would become a professor, a scholar, but he succumbed rapidly, with almost farcical ease—to vulgarity. The "future professor" became a

secretary to the Zemstvo Council, of which his wife's lover was the chairman. He gave the high-sounding name of "Service" to the little job at which he worked so languidly and half-heartedly. And does not his avowal that his wife (to whose vulgarity he nevertheless meekly submits) is—"not a human being," but a "blind, uncouth little beast," come straight out of light comedy. What could be more suited to stage-farce than his admission that after the death of his father, who had "oppressed him and his sisters with education," making them learn three languages, and so on, he had "begun to put on flesh, and got ever so fat in a single year," just as if "a weight had been removed" from his body? Apparently he had only been held together by another's will-power, and as soon as the pressure was removed, he began to go to seed, both physically and morally.

Vershinin and Tuzenbach are, of course, men of a rather different type from Andrei Prozorov, but in their passivity lurk the dangers which had ruined Prozorov. And in the helpless longings of the three lovely sisters, with their dream of "Moscow, Moscow!" there was something which evoked Chekhov's wistful smile. Dreaming alone does not constitute existence in the world of reality.

Such were the feelings with which Chekhov went to meet the "great and powerful storm," the purifying storm which was to carry happiness to his country.

"WELCOME, NEW LIFE!"

The Cherry Orchard, this last product of Chekhov's genius, is a bold combination of comedy—"lapsing every now and then into farce," as Chekhov said of it in a letter—and tender, subtle poetry.

Laughter, gay and unrestrained, penetrates every situation in the play. But the poetic element in it is no less significant. Chekhov comes out as a creator of the most original new dramatic form, that of poetical comedy, farce with social overtones.

Karl Marx expressed a profound thought when he called laughter a way of "bidding farewell" to the old, exhausted forms of life.

The Cherry Orchard may be regarded as the farewell of the new, youthful Russia of tomorrow to that past which has outlived its usefulness, is doomed to a swift end, is on the eve of extinction.

The end of the old life is so near that it already has a farcical, absurd, spectral, unreal look. This is the key to the play.

The obsolescent types belonging to this life of the past are spectral, too, especially the principal characters of the play—Ranevskaya and her brother Gayev. They could have said of themselves with complete justification: "We do not exist, we only think we do."

Ranevskaya and Gayev are the proprietors of "the most beautiful estate in the world," as Lopakhin says—a

delightful estate, the chief glory of which is its exquisite cherry orchard. These "proprietors," by their thoughtlessness, their utter failure to understand real life, have reduced the estate to a wretched condition, and there is nothing left but to put it up for sale by auction. The merchant Lopakhin, a peasant's son who has grown rich, and is now a friend of the family, warns them of the impending disaster, suggests various plans for saving the property, and begs them to think of the catastrophe hanging over their heads. But Ranevskaya and Gayev live in an imaginary world. Gayev devises one fantastic plan after another. Both shed copious tears over the loss of the cherry orchard, without which they cannot imagine life. In the meantime events take their natural course, the auction is held, and Lopakhin himself purchases the property. After the disaster is accomplished, it appears that it is no tragedy for Ranevskaya and Gayev, after all. Ranevskaya goes back to Paris, to her absurd "love," to which she would have returned anyhow, despite all her declarations of being unable to live without her native land and her cherry orchard. Gayev, too, quickly reconciles himself to the situation. The "terrible tragedy" turns out to be no tragedy at all for the actors in it, for the simple reason that they are incapable of feeling anything serious or tragic—such is the satirical, comedy aspect of the play.

The cherry orchard plays a prominent, many-faceted part in the play. First and foremost it is a symbol of the poetry of the old life, that poetry of "moonlit nights," "white-clad figures with slender waists," "nests of the gentry," whose staleness and utter obsolescence were described with such power by Chekhov in the story *Visiting Friends*. This poetry has by now degenerated into farce, light comedy. The culture of the aristocracy has long been dead, has become a highly "respected bookcase" addressed by Gayev, that typical figure of comedy,

a victim of morbid garrulity, in a facetious speech on the occasion of the bookcase's centenary. And the lawful heiress to the faded poetry of "the nests of the gentry," Ranevskaya's daughter Anya, the successor as it were to Liza Kalitina in Turgenev's *Nest of the Gentry* and to Tatyana Larina in Pushkin's *Yevgeny Onegin,* bids a gay, ringing, last farewell to the old, lifeless, now empty beauty. The student Petya Trofimov is partly responsible for her spiritual development, helping her to understand her own attitude towards the past, present and future of their country. He opens Anya's eyes to the dark and evil forces lurking behind the poetry of the nests of gentlefolk.

"Just think, Anya," he says to the girl, who listens to him eagerly, "your grandfather, your great-grandfather and all your ancestors were serf-owners, the owners of living souls—do not human faces look out at you from every cherry, from every leaf and every tree in the orchard, can't you hear their voices? Proprietorship in human beings has transformed you all, both your ancestors and yourselves, so that neither you, nor your mother, nor your uncle can ever realize that you are living on credit, at the expense of those whom you never allow into your house. It is so obvious that, if we are to live in the present, we must first put an end to the past, and have done with it...."

Put an end to the past! Therein lies the emotional significance of the play.

Trofimov summons Anya to the beauty of the future.

"I feel the approach of happiness, Anya, I almost see it coming.... There it is, happiness, here it comes, nearer and nearer, I can hear its steps. Even if we do not live to see it, if we never know it, what does it matter? Others will see it!"

Of course, Petya Trofimov himself does not belong to the progressive, able, strong fighters for future happiness. All through his character we feel the same dis-

crepancy between the power and scope of the dream and the weakness of the dreamer, as that which exists in Vershinin, Tuzenbach and other Chekhov types. Petya Trofimov, "perpetual student," "moth-eaten gentleman," is pure-minded, attractive, a little eccentric and not strong enough for the great struggle. In a word, he is good for nothing, like the rest of the characters in the play. But everything he says to Anya is what Chekhov himself feels intimately.

Once more we are confronted by the familiar Chekhov theme of the nearness of happiness. Obviously the businesslike Lopakhin could not be its bearer! And yet this is just how those critics who classified Chekhov as a bourgeois, "radical" or otherwise, interpreted the play. Nothing could be more ridiculous than such a vulgar interpretation. As if a type like Lopakhin could be associated with beauty! All he thinks of is to fell the beautiful orchard and erect small country-houses for renting. He brings with him into life vulgar, bourgeois prose, which will destroy and uproot all that is beautiful! Lopakhin is, as Petya Trofimov rightly describes him, "a beast of prey ready to devour everything that comes its way." And he "devours" the cherry orchard. Lopakhin is necessary for the "economy of nature," as Petya Trofimov says, for the execution of a brief social function—the acceleration of the destruction, the "devouring" of what has served its day.

But the future is not for the Lopakhins!

The Cherry Orchard is a play dealing with the past, present and future of our country. The future rises before us in the image of an exquisitely beautiful orchard.

"The whole of Russia is our orchard," says Trofimov in the second act, and Anya takes up the strain in the last scene when she says: "We'll plant a new orchard, still more beautiful than this. . . ."

The image of the beauty of the *country itself* rises before us.

The Gayevs and Ranevskayas are unworthy of the beauty of the future, even of the vanishing past. They are the degenerate descendants of the culture of the past, mere pathetic ghosts, not even its exponents.

"There is the tearful Ranevskaya and the other former owners of the *Cherry Orchard*, as selfish as children, and as weak as old persons," Gorky wrote. "They have outlived their day, and go about moaning, seeing and understanding nothing of what is going on round them, parasites lacking even the strength to fasten upon life once again." Neither they with their insignificance nor Lopakhin with his prose, have anything to do with the delicate loveliness of the cherry orchard, with the poetry of life!

But they will be followed by those who are worthy of the beauty of their country, who will purify it, expiate its entire past, and turn it into an enchanted garden. And we are made to feel that Anya will be among those people.

Such is the poetical meaning underlying this play, the wisest, most radiant and optimistic of all Chekhov's writings.

Chekhov wanted the Art Theatre to produce the play in the same optimistic spirit in which he had written it. He wanted the audience to rock with laughter over the insignificant, unreal world of the Gayevs and Ranevskayas, he demanded that the part of Ranevskaya should be given to a well-known actress, who always played comic old ladies, he wanted the farcical nature of the sufferings undergone by the lachrymose heroes, and of their tears, to be obvious to every spectator. When V. I. Nemirovich-Danchenko wrote to him that there are "too many weepers" in the play, Anton Pavlovich was frankly astonished. "Why do you say in your telegram there are a lot

of weepers in my play?" he asked. "Where do you find them? Varya is the only one, and then she is a weeper by nature, so that her tears ought not to depress the spectators. It is true that I often make them speak 'through tears,' but that is only to show their mood, the tears themselves are not necessary."

We cannot seriously expect the audience to sympathize with those not very serious sufferings of such shallow people, even when so amiable and good-humoured, as Ranevskaya and Gayev. Everything about them is absurd, even the fact that the late husband of Ranevskaya "died of too much champagne." Death itself assumes a comic, farcical tinge, for Ranevskaya speaks of her deceased husband as a man who never created anything all his life but debts.

The method employed by Chekhov to bring out the absurd unreality and frivolity of the world of the Gayevs and Ranevskayas is very interesting. He surrounds the central characters of the comedy with frankly farcical, grotesque personages, who reflect as it were the comic insignificance of the main personages.

In his early, juvenile play *Fatherless*, Chekhov made an experiment in this reflective method. The essentially servile nature of the "gentlemen" is shown through their likeness to their servants: the masters are reflected in their servants—"like master, like man." One of the characters in *Fatherless* expresses his astonishment at the likeness: "All in frock-coats! Oh my! You *are* like your masters!"

This method of parody by reflection is developed in many variations, from the most simple to the most complex.

Dunyasha, the maid, says to her lover Yasha, the footman: "I've grown so nervous, I am always in a twitter. I was quite a little girl when they took me into our lady's house, and now I've quite grown out of common

ways; and my hands are as white as a lady's. I'm so sensitive and delicate, I am afraid of everything. I'm always frightened. And if you deceive me, Yasha, I don't know what will happen to my nerves."

Dunyasha is a parody on the "white-clad figures with slender waists," with their "subtle," "aristocratic," fragile nerves—figures which had served their day by then. Dunyasha dreams of the very things they used to dream of—moonlit trysts, sentimental romances.

The characters of Charlotte, the eccentric lady-conjurer, the clerk Yepikhodov and Yasha, the footman, also play the role of parody by reflection. It is in them, in these caricatures of the "gentry", that the utter unreality, the absurd frivolity of the life led by Gayev and Ranevskaya is reflected with such clarity.

There is something similar in the ridiculous, solitary life, which nobody needs, of Charlotte Ivanovna, the hanger-on of the family, and the equally absurd and unnecessary life of Ranevskaya herself. They both regard themselves as enigmatically-superfluous, strange beings, and they see life as something misty, obscure, and oddly amorphous. Charlotte speaks thus of herself:

"CHARLOTTE (*thoughtfully*): I have no proper passport, I don't know how old I am, and I think I'm still young. When I was a little girl my father and mother used to go about from one country fair to another, acting in side-shows, and very good ones, too. And I used to do *salto-mortale* and all sorts of tricks. And when Papa and Mama died an old German lady adopted me and taught me. That was all right. When I grew up I became a governess. But who I am and where I come from I don't know. Who my parents were, I don't know—very likely they weren't married at all.... (*Takes a cucumber out of her pocket and munches at it.*) I don't know anything at all. (*A pause.*) I long to talk, and I have no one to

talk to.... I have no friends.... And who I am, or why I live, nobody knows...."

Her tale is not a cheerful one, but the actress who made a mournful figure of Charlotte would be playing it wrong. The most important thing about her is that she is able to lose herself completely in her passion for conjuring and playing tricks. Charlotte retreats from the amorphous life in which everything is enigmatic, in which "we only seem to exist," to one still more amorphous, where logic is mocked, the world of conjuring tricks. In this flight from reality is her consolation, her whole life.

Ranevskaya can no more "understand what her life means" than Charlotte, and she, too, has "no one to talk to." She complains to Petya Trofimov in the words of Charlotte: "You can see what's true and what's untrue, but I seem to have lost my sight.... I can't remain alone —the silence terrifies me...."

Like Charlotte, Ranevskaya, too, "keeps thinking" she is "a young thing," and she, too, is a kind of eccentric hanger-on to life, of which she understands nothing.

Yepikhodov is a remarkable comic figure. With his "hundred-and-one misfortunes," he is a kind of caricature of Gayev, of the landowner Simeonov-Pishchik, and, to a certain extent, even of Petya Trofimov (Vershinin, in *The Three Sisters*, with his petty misfortunes, also comes to one's mind). Yepikhodov is "good for nothing," to use the favourite expression of Gayev's old man-servant, Firs. A contemporary critic of Chekhov aptly remarked that *The Cherry Orchard* is "a play about good-for-nothing creatures." This part of the play's theme centres around Yepikhodov. He is the very soul of the company of half-baked creatures.

And Gayev, too, has "a hundred-and-one misfortunes" like Yepikhodov; nothing comes of all his good intentions, which meet with comic failure at every step. The figure

of Yepikhodov emphasizes the frivolity, the unserious nature of all these misfortunes, the farcical essence of them.

The landowner Simeonov-Pishchik, for ever on the verge of utter bankruptcy, for ever running gasping to all his friends for loans, is also the very emblem of "a hundred-and-one misfortunes." He is a man who, as Petya Trofimov says of both Gayev and Ranevskaya, "lives on debts"—such individuals *live on others, on the people.* And their amorphous, ridiculous lives are bound to come to an end soon, very soon.

But where does the *lyrical* element in *The Cherry Orchard* spring from?

There is a note of the constant Chekhov grief for wasted beauty in the play. Here it is grief for the poetical cherry orchard, an elegy of farewell.

But this is bright grief, like the grief of Pushkin's poetry. The whole play is fraught with a mood of bright farewell to the life that is passing, with all that is good and bad in it, a mood of joyful welcome to the new, the young.

The grief in *The Cherry Orchard* is not to be identified with the trivial sufferings of the Gayevs and Ranevskayas. If the lyrical undercurrents in the play—the symbol of the cherry orchard—are identified with these semi-farcical figures, if Gayev and Ranevskaya are accepted as representatives of dying poetry and beauty, you will have to take all their emotions, all their tears, seriously. And then what Chekhov dreaded will happen—*The Cherry Orchard* will cease to be a poetical comedy, "in some places even a farce," and become a "heart-rending" drama, in which copious tears will serve not only to show "moods of the persons in the play," but to depress the audience as well. And the audience, especially the modern, Soviet audience, will experience feelings of the utmost embarrassment—they will be forced to "share" in

good earnest the sufferings of people incapable themselves of any serious suffering whatever.

The definition of comedy given by Aristotle applies to a certain extent to Gayev and Ranevskaya:

"Comedy, as we have said, is the delineation of the worst sort of people, shown not with all their vices, but in a humorous aspect. The comic is a particle of the hideous.... It is that which is hideous and deformed, but does not suffer."

Chekhov treated his satire on the disappearing aristocracy in a farcical vein. He selected as the objects of his satire not wicked reactionaries, not rabid serf-owners, like the "toad" Rashevich in *On the Estate*, but perfectly harmless, entertaining, good-humoured folk, neither desirous nor capable of causing suffering to anyone at all. And thus he managed to emphasize still more successfully the theme of the complete ruin, of the hollowness of the "nest of the gentry," the parasitic ways and demonstrable harmfulness of the Gayevs and Ranevskayas.

Turgenev, replying to a letter from K. Sluchevsky on the bad impression made by *Fathers and Sons* on the Russian students at Heidelberg University, wrote:

"*My novel is entirely directed against the aristocracy, as a leading class.* Look into the faces of N.P., P.P., Arkady. Weakness and languor, or mediocrity. My aesthetic feelings forced me to choose good specimens of the aristocracy, so as to prove my theme the better—if this is the cream, then what is the milk like? It would have been merely crude to have selected officials, generals, thieves, etc. I have chosen the best of the aristocracy, and chosen them with the specific purpose of demonstrating their unworthiness. The presentation on the one hand of bribetakers, and on the other of a blameless youth, I leave to others.... I wanted something more."

It would of course be impossible to trace a direct analogy between Turgenev's attitude to the aristocracy in

Fathers and Sons and Chekhov's in *The Cherry Orchard*. It must not be left out of account that, in the reply to K. Sluchevsky just quoted, Turgenev explains his theoretical and political position with regard to radically- and revolutionarily-inclined youth, who caught at certain lyrical notes sounded by an author connected by his origin and upbringing with the aristocracy. Chekhov, the plebeian, the man of the middle classes, could never have nourished any but hostile feelings for the aristocracy. Moreover, unlike Turgenev, he could never have claimed that he had chosen *good* representatives of the aristocracy for his play. What he could have said, however, was that his "aesthetic feelings" had forced him to choose for his lyrical comedy harmless, thoroughly bankrupt representatives of the aristocracy, unable to fight for themselves, the better to prove his theme—the utter unworthiness, insignificance and breakdown of this whole class, the imminence of the end of all that life which was bound up with them.

The main satirical point of the play is that the very "tragedy" of Gayev and Ranevskaya—the loss of their cherry orchard—turns out, in the long run, to be not very important to the sufferers themselves. It is precisely this which brings out with especial clarity the farcical elements in *The Cherry Orchard*, that *parody of tragedy*. The theory of the comic contains a thesis that laughter is evoked by the unexpected (a man expects to see a vast mountain, a miracle of nature, and is shown a tiny mouse instead). It is precisely thus that we expect to see Gayev and Ranevskaya shaken to their souls, we expect a tragedy, and instead we are shown these individuals not merely perfectly reconciled to the appalling disaster, but actually pleased with the misfortune that has overtaken them. The characters in *The Cherry Orchard* answer to the classical features of comedy. It is well known that the characters of a comedy are usually not given to

suffering—that in a comedy the conflct is waged by embarrassing, absurd, or humiliating means (we may remember the wild plans for saving the cherry orchard proposed by Gayev, which made Ranevskaya tell him he was "raving"). It is also well known that, according to many classical definitions, comedy (or, as we would prefer to say, farcical comedy) should never agitate the spectator unduly, never evoke emotions of sympathy.

The characters in *The Cherry Orchard* reconcile themselves with typical ease and rapidity to the loss of that over which they had shed such floods of tears, without which they had declared that they could not live. Naturally they could not bear to miss such a splendid opportunity for shedding tears. But the tears themselves did not mean much.

For all its gentleness and tactfulness, the play shows a plebeian severity in the attitude to all the charming Mr. Gayevs and Mrs. Ranevskayas. Yasha the footman is the very soul of parasitism, the embodiment of the sober *truth* about their lives, their attitude to others. Was it not precisely contact with the life of gentlefolk which spoiled Yasha? These gentlefolk were so kind, so tactful, their souls were so sensitive, uneasy, refined! How the crude words of Yasha to the aged Firs would have shocked them: "You're a nuisance, Firs. (*Yawns.*) It's time for you to peg out." As if the Mr. Gayevs, the Mrs. Ranevskayas could say anything so gross! And yet these words of Yasha's are the truth of their whole behaviour, of the very essence of their lives, their attitude to the old man, who has worked for them all his life. They leave him alone, ill, in the boarded-up house, like some unwanted object—leave him, to use the loathsome flunkey dialect of Yasha, to "peg out." Of course they do not do this out of cruelty, but simply out of their usual irresponsibility, absent-mindedness, frivolity, upper-class neglectfulness. But the truth is the truth, and people must be

judged not by their words, but by their deeds. Nothing is dear to them, nothing is sacred in their lives. All they can do is chatter—of their tenderness for Firs, of their love for the cherry orchard.

This leads us to a conviction of Chekhov's profound satirical intention. It is just this terrible end of the helpless old man, boarded up alive as in a coffin, which enables us thoroughly to realize the significance of the fact that the aristocracy in *The Cherry Orchard* is represented by such delightful, harmless people, so attractive in their way. Herein is displayed the sage Chekhov detachment. The aristocrats might have been cruel, like Saltychikha,* or kind and amusing like Ranevskaya; but their essence would have remained the same. With some it is ferocity, with others, childish irresponsibility, moth-like flutterings, but who knows which is "better" and which more terrible? Such a point of view reveals the gravity of what Petya Trofimov says about the cherry orchard: ". . . Do not human faces look out at you from every cherry, from every leaf and every tree in the orchard, can't you hear their voices?" The literal meaning behind the images: *From every leaf, from every tree-trunk, from every cherry* in that lovely orchard, *human faces* are looking out at you, living souls, must be felt before we can understand that this orchard is a terrible thing. And when this has come home to us we shall see that the more attractive, the more poetic it is, the more terrible it is. And this applies to Gayev and Ranevskaya, too—the more attractive, the "easier" they are, the more terrible they are, in their frivolity and irresponsibility. Gorky put words of genius into the mouth of one of the

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* Saltykova—the woman landowner, well known for her brutality to her serfs. She had 139 persons tortured to death in the course of six years. Saltykova's brutality became so notorious that the government was forced in 1762 to send her to trial.—*Ed.*

characters in *The Life of Klim Samgin*: "*The revolution is directed against the irresponsible.*"

It is no mere chance that Gayev and Ranevskaya are always remembering their childhood. There is much that is childish in themselves. Their whole attitude to the cherry orchard is tinged with childishness, as is their whole attitude to life. This it is which makes Gayev say that he is already fifty-one, "strange as it may seem." It really does seem strange that this great big baby is over fifty. For a normal person any age seems natural, any age "suits" him. But maturity does not suit Gayev at all. Yes, Gayev and Ranevskaya are grown-up children, and it is no mere chance that this room in which they are first seen is their old "nursery." Do you remember what this room used to be, Mama?" asks Anya. "RANEVSKAYA (*joyfully, through her tears*): The nursery! The nursery, my dear, beautiful nursery! I used to sleep here when I was little. (*Weeps.*) And I am like a little girl again. . . ." And Gayev confirms her words: "Once you and I, Sister, used to sleep in this very room, and now I'm fifty-one, strange as it may seem. . . ." Yes, and they are still children, "strange as it may seem," and we get to know them in the nursery, which is not strange at all. The whole of life has been a nursery for them. But these are spolit children, spolit by their upper-class upbringing and by life. The spoiledness of Ranevskaya is a part of her childishness. And Anya feels the *childishness* in her mother's soul; that is why she suggests that they should enter tomorrow's enchanted garden together. In this summons is the generosity of youth. . . .

Nothing could be sweeter than childhood. But in grown-up, middle-aged persons childishness is absurd. After a certain age it becomes comic. And this brings us once more to the reason for Chekhov calling *The Cherry Orchard* a "Farce in Four Acts."

A theatre which sacrificed the undoubted attractiveness, ease and quaint charm of Ranevskaya and Gayev, to a satirical rendering of their images would be falling into gross error. Such an error would be just as bad as the reverse—the ignoring of the satirical essence of these images in favour of their attractiveness. Only one thing is required of the theatre in regard to Chekhov—exactness. The Soviet theatre exists to expound life to its audiences, to youth. And life is complex, never going forward in a straight line, full of contradictions, and it is extremely important to bear in mind that parasitism can sometimes show itself in the most refined, "harmless" aspect.

There is one person in the play who does not run counter to the beauty of the cherry orchard, and might have blended harmoniously with it. This is Anya. But Anya is an image of spring, an image of the future. She bids farewell to the whole of the old life. She is a younger sister to the three sisters (Olga, Masha and Irina), only differing from them in that she finds her "Moscow," just as did Nadya, the heroine of Chekhov's last story, *The Bride*.

The figure of Anya can only thoroughly be understood when placed side by side with that of Nadya. *The Bride* was written in 1903, the year of *The Cherry Orchard*. In theme and subject it is a kind of variation on *The Cherry Orchard*. The young couple of *The Cherry Orchard*—Anya and Petya Trofimov—are much like Nadya and Sasha in *The Bride*. The relations between Nadya and Sasha are the same as those existing between Anya and Petya. The "eternal student," who has spent almost fifteen years in an art school, Sacha, the crank and failure, is only a temporary, transient figure in the life of Nadya. He helps her to know her own heart, under his influence she breaks away from her fatuous fiancé, escaping almost at the altar, running away to the capital from

her family, from the fetid atmosphere of vulgarity, of paltry "happiness," to take part in the struggle for the beautiful future. Later, when she is already deep in the struggle, in real life, Sasha appears to her as sweet, honest and pure as ever, but no longer anything like so wise and progressive as she thought him to be. When they met after a long separation Sasha seemed "dingy and provincial" to her, and still later the whole of her "friendship with Sasha seemed to belong to a past, which, while dear, was now very distant." And in time Anya will think of her friendship with Petya in exactly the same way.

People like Petya Trofimov, Sasha and other characters of this sort in Chekhov's works, are distinguished by the mark of something eccentric, "half-baked." Their significance in life is transient, not altogether independent. It is not they, but others, different from them, who will realize the beautiful dream of a life filled with justice....

The inner similarity between *The Bride* and *The Cherry Orchard* shows itself first and foremost in the dreams of the coming blossoming of the native land, which pervade both works. The characters in *The Bride*, like those in *The Cherry Orchard*, foresee the nearness of a time when there will be no more drab provincial towns in the native land, when "everything will be turned topsy-turvy, everything will be changed, as if by magic. And there will be huge splendid buildings, beautiful parks, marvellous fountains, fine people...."

And how spring-like, how optimistic, is the note on which *The Bride* ends!

After a long absence Nadya returns to her native town for a few days. She "walked about the garden and the streets, looking at the houses and the drab fences, and it seemed to her that the town had been getting old for a long time, that it had outlived its day and was now

waiting, either for its end, or for the beginning of something fresh and youthful. Oh, for this new, pure life to begin, when one could go straight forward, looking one's fate boldly in the eyes, confident that one was in the right, could be gay and free! This life was bound to come sooner or later.... Life stretched before her, new, vast, spacious, and though still vague and mysterious, beckoned to her, drawing her onward."

How different are the bright endings of *The Cherry Orchard* and *The Bride* from those of *Uncle Vanya* and *The Three Sisters*! Both Anya and Nadya had already found the path along which Chekhov summoned his characters, and the joyous music of the confirmation of life and the struggle beautifies both *The Bride* and *The Cherry Orchard*, these last works of Chekhov, flooded with more light and youthfulness than any others.

The reader and spectator can clearly see what Chekhov, with his eye on the censor, was unable to say: that both Anya and Nadya had entered the revolutionary struggle for freedom and the happiness of the native land. V. V. Veresayev remembers that a slight argument arose during the reading in Gorky's rooms of *The Bride.* To Veresayev's remark that "that was not how girls go into the revolution," Chekhov replied: "There is more than one way."

The reader can not fail to understand that before him is the exquisite image of a Russian girl, entering on the path of the struggle in order to *alter life completely*, to turn the whole of her native land into a blossoming garden. "The great thing is to turn your life upside down, nothing else matters," says Sasha.

Along with his heroes, Chekhov himself felt that "everything had grown old, outlived itself," and that everything was only waiting for "the beginning of something young, fresh." And with youthful zest he bade farewell to the past he so hated. "Farewell, old life!" rings

out in the end of *The Cherry Orchard* in the youthful voice of Anya, the voice of young Russia, the voice of Chekhov.

The images of Anya and Nadya merge in the exquisite image of a *bride*—the image of the youth of the native land. "Welcome, new life!"—these words resounding through *The Cherry Orchard* were Chekhov's last words —words imbued with joyous greetings for the new day dawning for the native land, the day of its freedom, glory and happiness.

IN 1904

"For the first time since we have been producing Chekhov," wrote K. S. Stanislavsky, "the first performance of *The Cherry Orchard* coincided with his arrival in Moscow. This suggested to us the idea of getting up an evening in honour of our beloved poet. Chekhov was violently opposed to this, threatened to stay at home, not to come to the theatre. But the temptation was too great for us, and we insisted. Moreover this first performance coincided with Anton Pavlovich's name-day (and his birthday, too—January 17, 1904—*Author*).

"The appointed day was drawing near, and we had to think about the form of the celebrations and our gifts to Anton Pavlovich. A knotty problem! I made the rounds of all the old curiosity shops, hoping to come upon something suitable, but with the exception of a length of exquisite, rare embroidery, I found nothing. For want of anything better we decided to adorn the wreath with it and give it to him as it was.

" 'I say, that's a lovely thing—it ought to be in a museum,' he said to me reproachfully when the celebrations were over.

" 'Tell me what we ought to have given you then, Anton Pavlovich?' I asked.

" 'A mousetrap,' he said gravely, after a pause. 'Look here, the mice must be got rid of.' Here he broke out into a laugh. 'Look what a lovely present the artist Korovin gave me! Wonderful!'

" 'What was it?' I wanted to know.

" 'A fishing-rod.'

"None of the other presents given him satisfied him, some even annoyed him by their banality.

" 'Now, look here, you can't present a writer with a silver penholder and an antique ink-pot.'

" 'Well, what should have been given?'

" 'An enema tube. I'm a doctor, you know. Or a pair of socks. My wife doesn't look after me. She's an actress. I go about in torn socks. "Look here, ducky," I say to her. "The big toe on my right foot is sticking out of the sock." "Wear it on your left foot," says she. That's no good, you know,' jested Anton Pavlovich, and again his gay laugh pealed out.

"But during the celebrations themselves he was gloomy, as if foreseeing the nearness of his death. Our hearts contracted painfully when we saw him standing in front of the curtain after the end of the third act, pale, thin, unable to suppress his cough while he was greeted with addresses and presents. Shouts to him to sit down came from the body of the hall. But Chekhov frowned and stood all through the long dragged-out jubilee proceedings, like those at which he had often laughed good-humouredly in his stories. And even here he could not repress a smile. One of the writers present began his speech with the very words with which Gayev addressed the 'respected bookcase' in the first act of *The Cherry Orchard*:

" 'Dear and respected ... (instead of the word "bookcase" the speaker inserted the name of Anton Pavlovich), I greet you,' etc.

"Anton Pavlovich darted a sidelong glance at me, who had acted Gayev, and a sly smile hovered around his lips.

"The celebrations were very solemn, but left behind them something sad. There was something funereal about them. We all felt heavy-hearted.

"...The spring of 1904 came. The health of Anton Pavlovich grew daily worse. Alarming symptoms appeared in the stomach, hinting at tuberculosis of the intestines. The doctors met in consultation and decided that Chekhov must be sent to Badenweiler. Preparations for going abroad were made. We all, myself included, felt an impulse to see Anton Pavlovich as often as possible at the last. But his health by no means invariably allowed him to receive us. Despite his illness, however, his gaiety did not forsake him.... He dreamed of writing a new play, of a sort quite new for him.

"In the summer of 1904 the sad news of the death of Anton Pavlovich arrived from Badenweiler.... His death was beautiful, calm, triumphant."

Anton Pavlovich felt that he was going to Badenweiler to die—he said as much before his departure to the writer N. D. Teleshov. And yet hope had not quite deserted him. He made a number of plans, and even thought of going to the Far East as a military doctor—Russia was at war with Japan.

O. L. Knipper-Chekhova writes as follows of the last hours of Anton Pavlovich (July 2):

"Only a few hours before his death he made me laugh with a story he meant to write. This was in Badenweiler. After three sad, anxious days he got a little better towards the evening. He sent me out for a walk in the park, for I had never left his side all these days, and when I came back he kept worrying about my not going down to supper, to which I replied that the gong had not yet been sounded. As it afterwards appeared we had simply not heard the gong, and Anton Pavlovich began to think out a story about a fashionable health resort thronged with well-fed, fat bankers, healthy and fond of eating, rosy-cheeked Englishmen and Americans, and how one day, they all gathered together—some from excursions, some from walks, in a word, from all over the

place, with the hope of a good, satisfying supper after the physical fatigue of the day. And suddenly it turned out that the cook had run away and there was no supper at all—and it was like a belly blow for all these spoilt people.... I sat there, huddled up on the sofa after the anxieties of the last few days, and laughed heartily. It never entered my head that in a few hours I should be standing beside the dead body of Chekhov....

"...Anton Pavlovich took his departure for another world quietly and calmly. Early in the night he waked up and asked me, for the first time in his life, to send for the doctor. A sensation of something huge and imminent hung over everything I did, an extraordinary calm and exactitude, as if someone were leading me with a steady hand. I only remember one ghastly moment of bewilderment—the sensation of the nearness of hundreds of people in the great, sleeping hotel, and at the same time the feeling of my own utter loneliness and helplessness....

"The doctor came in and told me to give him champagne. Anton Pavlovich sat up and said to the doctor, very loudly and meaningly, in German, a language which he knew very little: '*Ich sterbe.*' Then he picked up the glass, turned his face towards me, gave his wonderful smile, and said: 'I haven't drunk champagne for a long time...' calmly drained the glass, lay down quietly on his left side and very soon fell silent for ever.... And the terrible quiet of the night was only broken by the violent flutterings of a huge black moth, which kept knocking itself painfully against the lighted electric lamps, and hurling itself about the room....

"The doctor went away and amidst the stillness and closeness of the night the cork burst with an appalling noise out of the half-full bottle of champagne.... Day began to break, and together with awakening nature could be heard, like the first memorial service, the exqui-

site, tender singing of birds and the sounds of an organ being played in a church nearby. There were no sounds of human voices, there was none of the bustle of everyday life, nothing but the beauty, the peace and the majesty of death...."

The body of Chekhov was brought to Moscow a few days later. The funeral was held on the 9th of July. His grave is in the Novodevichy Monastery Cemetery, not far from that of his father.

The purifying storm burst out and our native land began to be turned into a beautiful garden, the laws of its life became those of truth and beauty.

"What a pleasure to respect people!" wrote Chekhov in his notebook.

We know this pleasure now. All that we have built and are building is inspired by the greatest respect for human beings.

Chekhov longed passionately "to live, to take part in" the creative work whose gigantic scope he divined so surely.

He lived and worked for his own times, for the future, and for us. He believed in us, in our rational powers, in our will, in our happiness.

A Russian through and through, Anton Pavlovich confirmed in all his writings the right to happiness of ordinary people, of toilers and creative workers, aspiring towards freedom in work, the great *ruling principle*, preferring truth, beauty and justice to all other blessings in the world.

And in every fresh victory of these ordinary people the bright genius of a simple Russian, Anton Pavlovich Chekhov, takes part, by his work, his love of truth, his dreams.

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6

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