

THE MAN IN A CASE

By Anton Chekhov

AT the furthest end of the village of Mironositskoe some belated sportsmen lodged for the night in the elder Prokofy's barn. There were two of them, the veterinary surgeon Ivan Ivanovitch and the schoolmaster Burkin. Ivan Ivanovitch had a rather strange double-barrelled surname—Tchimsha-Himalaisky—which did not suit him at all, and he was called simply Ivan Ivanovitch all over the province. He lived at a stud-farm near the town, and had come out shooting now to get a breath of fresh air. Burkin, the high-school teacher, stayed every summer at Count P——-'s, and had been thoroughly at home in this district for years.

They did not sleep. Ivan Ivanovitch, a tall, lean old fellow with long moustaches, was sitting outside the door, smoking a pipe in the moonlight. Burkin was lying within on the hay, and could not be seen in the darkness.

They were telling each other all sorts of stories. Among other things, they spoke of the fact that the elder's wife, Mavra, a healthy and by no means stupid woman, had never been beyond her native village, had never seen a town nor a railway in her life, and had spent the last ten years sitting behind the stove, and only at night going out into the street.

"What is there wonderful in that!" said Burkin. "There are plenty of people in the world, solitary by temperament, who try to retreat into their shell like a hermit crab or a snail. Perhaps it is an instance of atavism, a return to the period when the ancestor of man was not yet a social animal and lived alone in his den, or perhaps it is only one of the diversities of human character—who knows? I am not a natural science man, and it is not my business to settle such questions; I only mean to say that people like Mavra are not uncommon. There is no need to look far; two months ago a man called Byelikov, a colleague of mine, the Greek master, died in our town. You have heard of him, no doubt. He was remarkable for always wearing goloshes and a warm wadded coat, and carrying an umbrella even in the very finest weather. And his umbrella was in a case, and his watch was in a case made of grey chamois leather, and when he took out his penknife to sharpen his pencil, his penknife, too, was in a little case; and his face seemed to be in a case too, because he always hid it in his turned-up collar. He wore dark spectacles and flannel vests, stuffed up his ears with cotton-wool, and when he got into a cab always told the driver to put up the hood. In short, the man displayed a constant and insurmountable impulse to wrap himself in a covering, to make himself, so to speak, a case which would isolate him and protect him from external

influences. Reality irritated him, frightened him, kept him in continual agitation, and, perhaps to justify his timidity, his aversion for the actual, he always praised the past and what had never existed; and even the classical languages which he taught were in reality for him goloshes and umbrellas in which he sheltered himself from real life.

"Oh, how sonorous, how beautiful is the Greek language!" he would say, with a sugary expression; and as though to prove his words he would screw up his eyes and, raising his finger, would pronounce 'Anthropos!'

"And Byelikov tried to hide his thoughts also in a case. The only things that were clear to his mind were government circulars and newspaper articles in which something was forbidden. When some proclamation prohibited the boys from going out in the streets after nine o'clock in the evening, or some article declared carnal love unlawful, it was to his mind clear and definite; it was forbidden, and that was enough. For him there was always a doubtful element, something vague and not fully expressed, in any sanction or permission. When a dramatic club or a reading-room or a tea-shop was licensed in the town, he would shake his head and say softly:

"It is all right, of course; it is all very nice, but I hope it won't lead to anything!"

"Every sort of breach of order, deviation or departure from rule, depressed him, though one would have thought it was no business of his. If one of his colleagues was late for church or if rumours reached him of some prank of the high-school boys, or one of the mistresses was seen late in the evening in the company of an officer, he was much disturbed, and said he hoped that nothing would come of it. At the teachers' meetings he simply oppressed us with his caution, his circumspection, and his characteristic reflection on the ill-behaviour of the young people in both male and female high-schools, the uproar in the classes.

"Oh, he hoped it would not reach the ears of the authorities; oh, he hoped nothing would come of it; and he thought it would be a very good thing if Petrov were expelled from the second class and Yegorov from the fourth. And, do you know, by his sighs, his despondency, his black spectacles on his pale little face, a little face like a pole-cat's, you know, he crushed us all, and we gave way, reduced Petrov's and Yegorov's marks for conduct, kept them in, and in the end expelled them both. He had a strange habit of visiting our lodgings. He would come to a teacher's, would sit down, and remain silent, as though he were carefully inspecting something. He would sit like this in silence for an hour or two and then go away. This he called 'maintaining good relations with his colleagues'; and it was obvious that coming to see us and sitting there was tiresome to him, and that he came to see us simply because he considered it his duty as our colleague. We teachers were afraid of him. And even the headmaster

was afraid of him. Would you believe it, our teachers were all intellectual, right-minded people, brought up on Turgenev and Shtchedrin, yet this little chap, who always went about with goloshes and an umbrella, had the whole high-school under his thumb for fifteen long years! High-school, indeed—he had the whole town under his thumb! Our ladies did not get up private theatricals on Saturdays for fear he should hear of it, and the clergy dared not eat meat or play cards in his presence. Under the influence of people like Byelikov we have got into the way of being afraid of everything in our town for the last ten or fifteen years. They are afraid to speak aloud, afraid to send letters, afraid to make acquaintances, afraid to read books, afraid to help the poor, to teach people to read and write...."

Ivan Ivanovitch cleared his throat, meaning to say something, but first lighted his pipe, gazed at the moon, and then said, with pauses:

"Yes, intellectual, right minded people read Shtchedrin and Turgenev, Buckle, and all the rest of them, yet they knocked under and put up with it... that's just how it is."

"Byelikov lived in the same house as I did," Burkin went on, "on the same storey, his door facing mine; we often saw each other, and I knew how he lived when he was at home. And at home it was the same story: dressing-gown, nightcap, blinds, bolts, a perfect succession of prohibitions and restrictions of all sorts, and—'Oh, I hope nothing will come of it!' Lenten fare was bad for him, yet he could not eat meat, as people might perhaps say Byelikov did not keep the fasts, and he ate freshwater fish with butter—not a Lenten dish, yet one could not say that it was meat. He did not keep a female servant for fear people might think evil of him, but had as cook an old man of sixty, called Afanasy, half-witted and given to tippling, who had once been an officer's servant and could cook after a fashion. This Afanasy was usually standing at the door with his arms folded; with a deep sigh, he would mutter always the same thing:

""There are plenty of them about nowadays!"

"Byelikov had a little bedroom like a box; his bed had curtains. When he went to bed he covered his head over; it was hot and stuffy; the wind battered on the closed doors; there was a droning noise in the stove and a sound of sighs from the kitchen—ominous sighs.... And he felt frightened under the bed-clothes. He was afraid that something might happen, that Afanasy might murder him, that thieves might break in, and so he had troubled dreams all night, and in the morning, when we went together to the high-school, he was depressed and pale, and it was evident that the high-school full of people excited dread and aversion in his whole being, and that to walk beside me was irksome to a man of his solitary temperament.

"'They make a great noise in our classes,' he used to say, as though trying to find an explanation for his depression. 'It's beyond anything.'

"And the Greek master, this man in a case—would you believe it?—almost got married."

Ivan Ivanovitch glanced quickly into the barn, and said:

"You are joking!"

"Yes, strange as it seems, he almost got married. A new teacher of history and geography, Milhail Savvitch Kovalenko, a Little Russian, was appointed. He came, not alone, but with his sister Varinka. He was a tall, dark young man with huge hands, and one could see from his face that he had a bass voice, and, in fact, he had a voice that seemed to come out of a barrel—'boom, boom, boom!' And she was not so young, about thirty, but she, too, was tall, well-made, with black eyebrows and red cheeks—in fact, she was a regular sugar-plum, and so sprightly, so noisy; she was always singing Little Russian songs and laughing. For the least thing she would go off into a ringing laugh—'Ha-ha-ha!' We made our first thorough acquaintance with the Kovalenkos at the headmaster's name-day party. Among the glum and intensely bored teachers who came even to the name-day party as a duty we suddenly saw a new Aphrodite risen from the waves; she walked with her arms akimbo, laughed, sang, danced.... She sang with feeling 'The Winds do Blow,' then another song, and another, and she fascinated us all—all, even Byelikov. He sat down by her and said with a honeyed smile:

"'The Little Russian reminds one of the ancient Greek in its softness and agreeable resonance.'

"That flattered her, and she began telling him with feeling and earnestness that they had a farm in the Gadyatchsky district, and that her mamma lived at the farm, and that they had such pears, such melons, such kabaks! The Little Russians call pumpkins kabaks (i.e., pothouses), while their pothouses they call shinki, and they make a beetroot soup with tomatoes and aubergines in it, 'which was so nice—awfully nice!'

"We listened and listened, and suddenly the same idea dawned upon us all:

"'It would be a good thing to make a match of it,' the headmaster's wife said to me softly.

"We all for some reason recalled the fact that our friend Byelikov was not married, and it now seemed to us strange that we had hitherto failed to observe, and had in fact completely lost sight of, a detail so important in his life. What was his attitude to woman? How had he settled this vital question for himself? This had not interested us in the least till then; perhaps we had not even admitted the idea that a man who went out in all weathers in goloshes and slept under curtains could be in love.

"'He is a good deal over forty and she is thirty,' the headmaster's wife went on, developing her idea. 'I believe she would marry him.'

"All sorts of things are done in the provinces through boredom, all sorts of unnecessary and nonsensical things! And that is because what is necessary is not done at all. What need was there for instance, for us to make a match for this Byelikov, whom one could not even imagine married? The headmaster's wife, the inspector's wife, and all our high-school ladies, grew livelier and even better-looking, as though they had suddenly found a new object in life. The headmaster's wife would take a box at the theatre, and we beheld sitting in her box Varinka, with such a fan, beaming and happy, and beside her Byelikov, a little bent figure, looking as though he had been extracted from his house by pincers. I would give an evening party, and the ladies would insist on my inviting Byelikov and Varinka. In short, the machine was set in motion. It appeared that Varinka was not averse to matrimony. She had not a very cheerful life with her brother; they could do nothing but quarrel and scold one another from morning till night. Here is a scene, for instance. Kovalenko would be coming along the street, a tall, sturdy young ruffian, in an embroidered shirt, his love-locks falling on his forehead under his cap, in one hand a bundle of books, in the other a thick knotted stick, followed by his sister, also with books in her hand.

"'But you haven't read it, Mihalik!' she would be arguing loudly. 'I tell you, I swear you have not read it at all!'

"'And I tell you I have read it,' cries Kovalenko, thumping his stick on the pavement.

"'Oh, my goodness, Mihalik! why are you so cross? We are arguing about principles.'

"'I tell you that I have read it!' Kovalenko would shout, more loudly than ever.

"And at home, if there was an outsider present, there was sure to be a skirmish. Such a life must have been wearisome, and of course she must have longed for a home of her own. Besides, there was her age to be considered; there was no time left to pick and choose; it was a case of marrying anybody, even a Greek master. And, indeed, most of our young ladies don't mind whom they marry so long as they do get married.

However that may be, Varinka began to show an unmistakable partiality for Byelikov.

"And Byelikov? He used to visit Kovalenko just as he did us. He would arrive, sit down, and remain silent. He would sit quiet, and Varinka would sing to him 'The Winds do Blow,' or would look pensively at him with her dark eyes, or would suddenly go off into a peal—'Ha-ha-ha!'

"Suggestion plays a great part in love affairs, and still more in getting married. Everybody—both his colleagues and the ladies—began assuring Byelikov that he ought to get married, that there was nothing left for him in life but to get married; we all congratulated him, with solemn countenances delivered ourselves of various platitudes, such as 'Marriage is a serious step.' Besides, Varinka was good-looking and interesting; she was the daughter of a civil councillor, and had a farm; and what was more, she was the first woman who had been warm and friendly in her manner to him. His head was turned, and he decided that he really ought to get married."

"Well, at that point you ought to have taken away his goloshes and umbrella," said Ivan Ivanovitch.

"Only fancy! that turned out to be impossible. He put Varinka's portrait on his table, kept coming to see me and talking about Varinka, and home life, saying marriage was a serious step. He was frequently at Kovalenko's, but he did not alter his manner of life in the least; on the contrary, indeed, his determination to get married seemed to have a depressing effect on him. He grew thinner and paler, and seemed to retreat further and further into his case.

"'I like Varvara Savvishna,' he used to say to me, with a faint and wry smile, 'and I know that every one ought to get married, but... you know all this has happened so suddenly.... One must think a little.'

"'What is there to think over?' I used to say to him. 'Get married—that is all.'

"'No; marriage is a serious step. One must first weigh the duties before one, the responsibilities... that nothing may go wrong afterwards. It worries me so much that I don't sleep at night. And I must confess I am afraid: her brother and she have a strange way of thinking; they look at things strangely, you know, and her disposition is very impetuous. One may get married, and then, there is no knowing, one may find oneself in an unpleasant position.'

"And he did not make an offer; he kept putting it off, to the great vexation of the headmaster's wife and all our ladies; he went on weighing his future duties and

responsibilities, and meanwhile he went for a walk with Varinka almost every day—possibly he thought that this was necessary in his position—and came to see me to talk about family life. And in all probability in the end he would have proposed to her, and would have made one of those unnecessary, stupid marriages such as are made by thousands among us from being bored and having nothing to do, if it had not been for a colossal scandal. I must mention that Varinka's brother, Kovalenko, detested Byelikov from the first day of their acquaintance, and could not endure him.

"'I don't understand,' he used to say to us, shrugging his shoulders—'I don't understand how you can put up with that sneak, that nasty phiz. Ugh! how can you live here! The atmosphere is stifling and unclean! Do you call yourselves schoolmasters, teachers? You are paltry government clerks. You keep, not a temple of science, but a department for red tape and loyal behaviour, and it smells as sour as a police-station. No, my friends; I will stay with you for a while, and then I will go to my farm and there catch crabs and teach the Little Russians. I shall go, and you can stay here with your Judas—damn his soul!'

"Or he would laugh till he cried, first in a loud bass, then in a shrill, thin laugh, and ask me, waving his hands:

"'What does he sit here for? What does he want? He sits and stares.'

"He even gave Byelikov a nickname, 'The Spider.' And it will readily be understood that we avoided talking to him of his sister's being about to marry 'The Spider.'

"And on one occasion, when the headmaster's wife hinted to him what a good thing it would be to secure his sister's future with such a reliable, universally respected man as Byelikov, he frowned and muttered:

"'It's not my business; let her marry a reptile if she likes. I don't like meddling in other people's affairs.'

"Now hear what happened next. Some mischievous person drew a caricature of Byelikov walking along in his goloshes with his trousers tucked up, under his umbrella, with Varinka on his arm; below, the inscription 'Anthropos in love.' The expression was caught to a marvel, you know. The artist must have worked for more than one night, for the teachers of both the boys' and girls' high-schools, the teachers of the seminary, the government officials, all received a copy. Byelikov received one, too. The caricature made a very painful impression on him.

"We went out together; it was the first of May, a Sunday, and all of us, the boys and the teachers, had agreed to meet at the high-school and then to go for a walk together to a wood beyond the town. We set off, and he was green in the face and gloomier than a storm-cloud.

"What wicked, ill-natured people there are!" he said, and his lips quivered.

"I felt really sorry for him. We were walking along, and all of a sudden—would you believe it?—Kovalenko came bowling along on a bicycle, and after him, also on a bicycle, Varinka, flushed and exhausted, but good-humoured and gay.

"We are going on ahead,' she called. 'What lovely weather! Awfully lovely!"

"And they both disappeared from our sight. Byelikov turned white instead of green, and seemed petrified. He stopped short and stared at me....

"What is the meaning of it? Tell me, please!" he asked. 'Can my eyes have deceived me? Is it the proper thing for high-school masters and ladies to ride bicycles?"

"What is there improper about it?" I said. 'Let them ride and enjoy themselves.'

"But how can that be?" he cried, amazed at my calm. 'What are you saying?"

"And he was so shocked that he was unwilling to go on, and returned home.

"Next day he was continually twitching and nervously rubbing his hands, and it was evident from his face that he was unwell. And he left before his work was over, for the first time in his life. And he ate no dinner. Towards evening he wrapped himself up warmly, though it was quite warm weather, and sallied out to the Kovalenkos'. Varinka was out; he found her brother, however.

"Pray sit down,' Kovalenko said coldly, with a frown. His face looked sleepy; he had just had a nap after dinner, and was in a very bad humour.

"Byelikov sat in silence for ten minutes, and then began:

"I have come to see you to relieve my mind. I am very, very much troubled. Some scurrilous fellow has drawn an absurd caricature of me and another person, in whom we are both deeply interested. I regard it as a duty to assure you that I have had no hand in it.... I have given no sort of ground for such ridicule—on the contrary, I have

always behaved in every way like a gentleman.'

"Kovalenko sat sulky and silent. Byelikov waited a little, and went on slowly in a mournful voice:

"'And I have something else to say to you. I have been in the service for years, while you have only lately entered it, and I consider it my duty as an older colleague to give you a warning. You ride on a bicycle, and that pastime is utterly unsuitable for an educator of youth.'

"'Why so?' asked Kovalenko in his bass.

"'Surely that needs no explanation, Mihail Savvitch—surely you can understand that? If the teacher rides a bicycle, what can you expect the pupils to do? You will have them walking on their heads next! And so long as there is no formal permission to do so, it is out of the question. I was horrified yesterday! When I saw your sister everything seemed dancing before my eyes. A lady or a young girl on a bicycle—it's awful!'

"'What is it you want exactly?'

"'All I want is to warn you, Mihail Savvitch. You are a young man, you have a future before you, you must be very, very careful in your behaviour, and you are so careless—oh, so careless! You go about in an embroidered shirt, are constantly seen in the street carrying books, and now the bicycle, too. The headmaster will learn that you and your sister ride the bicycle, and then it will reach the higher authorities.... Will that be a good thing?'

"'It's no business of anybody else if my sister and I do bicycle!' said Kovalenko, and he turned crimson. 'And damnation take any one who meddles in my private affairs!'

"Byelikov turned pale and got up.

"'If you speak to me in that tone I cannot continue,' he said. 'And I beg you never to express yourself like that about our superiors in my presence; you ought to be respectful to the authorities.'

"'Why, have I said any harm of the authorities?' asked Kovalenko, looking at him wrathfully. 'Please leave me alone. I am an honest man, and do not care to talk to a gentleman like you. I don't like sneaks!'

"Byelikov flew into a nervous flutter, and began hurriedly putting on his coat, with an expression of horror on his face. It was the first time in his life he had been spoken to so rudely.

"'You can say what you please,' he said, as he went out from the entry to the landing on the staircase. 'I ought only to warn you: possibly some one may have overheard us, and that our conversation may not be misunderstood and harm come of it, I shall be compelled to inform our headmaster of our conversation... in its main features. I am bound to do so.'

"'Inform him? You can go and make your report!'

"Kovalenko seized him from behind by the collar and gave him a push, and Byelikov rolled downstairs, thudding with his goloshes. The staircase was high and steep, but he rolled to the bottom unhurt, got up, and touched his nose to see whether his spectacles were all right. But just as he was falling down the stairs Varinka came in, and with her two ladies; they stood below staring, and to Byelikov this was more terrible than anything. I believe he would rather have broken his neck or both legs than have been an object of ridicule. 'Why, now the whole town would hear of it; it would come to the headmaster's ears, would reach the higher authorities—oh, it might lead to something! There would be another caricature, and it would all end in his being asked to resign his post....

"When he got up, Varinka recognized him, and, looking at his ridiculous face, his crumpled overcoat, and his goloshes, not understanding what had happened and supposing that he had slipped down by accident, could not restrain herself, and laughed loud enough to be heard by all the flats:

"'Ha-ha-ha!'

"And this pealing, ringing 'Ha-ha-ha!' was the last straw that put an end to everything: to the proposed match and to Byelikov's earthly existence. He did not hear what Varinka said to him; he saw nothing. On reaching home, the first thing he did was to remove her portrait from the table; then he went to bed, and he never got up again.

"Three days later Afanasy came to me and asked whether we should not send for the doctor, as there was something wrong with his master. I went in to Byelikov. He lay silent behind the curtain, covered with a quilt; if one asked him a question, he said 'Yes' or 'No' and not another sound. He lay there while Afanasy, gloomy and scowling, hovered about him, sighing heavily, and smelling like a pothouse.

"A month later Byelikov died. We all went to his funeral—that is, both the high-schools and the seminary. Now when he was lying in his coffin his expression was mild, agreeable, even cheerful, as though he were glad that he had at last been put into a case which he would never leave again. Yes, he had attained his ideal! And, as though in his honour, it was dull, rainy weather on the day of his funeral, and we all wore goloshes and took our umbrellas. Varinka, too, was at the funeral, and when the coffin was lowered into the grave she burst into tears. I have noticed that Little Russian women are always laughing or crying—no intermediate mood.

"One must confess that to bury people like Byelikov is a great pleasure. As we were returning from the cemetery we wore discreet Lenten faces; no one wanted to display this feeling of pleasure—a feeling like that we had experienced long, long ago as children when our elders had gone out and we ran about the garden for an hour or two, enjoying complete freedom. Ah, freedom, freedom! The merest hint, the faintest hope of its possibility gives wings to the soul, does it not?

"We returned from the cemetery in a good humour. But not more than a week had passed before life went on as in the past, as gloomy, oppressive, and senseless—a life not forbidden by government prohibition, but not fully permitted, either: it was no better. And, indeed, though we had buried Byelikov, how many such men in cases were left, how many more of them there will be!"

"That's just how it is," said Ivan Ivanovitch and he lighted his pipe.

"How many more of them there will be!" repeated Burkin.

The schoolmaster came out of the barn. He was a short, stout man, completely bald, with a black beard down to his waist. The two dogs came out with him.

"What a moon!" he said, looking upwards.

It was midnight. On the right could be seen the whole village, a long street stretching far away for four miles. All was buried in deep silent slumber; not a movement, not a sound; one could hardly believe that nature could be so still. When on a moonlight night you see a broad village street, with its cottages, haystacks, and slumbering willows, a feeling of calm comes over the soul; in this peace, wrapped away from care, toil, and sorrow in the darkness of night, it is mild, melancholy, beautiful, and it seems as though the stars look down upon it kindly and with tenderness, and as though there were no evil on earth and all were well. On the left the open country

began from the end of the village; it could be seen stretching far away to the horizon, and there was no movement, no sound in that whole expanse bathed in moonlight.

"Yes, that is just how it is," repeated Ivan Ivanovitch; "and isn't our living in town, airless and crowded, our writing useless papers, our playing vint—isn't that all a sort of case for us? And our spending our whole lives among trivial, fussy men and silly, idle women, our talking and our listening to all sorts of nonsense—isn't that a case for us, too? If you like, I will tell you a very edifying story."

"No; it's time we were asleep," said Burkin. "Tell it tomorrow."

They went into the barn and lay down on the hay. And they were both covered up and beginning to doze when they suddenly heard light footsteps—patter, patter.... Some one was walking not far from the barn, walking a little and stopping, and a minute later, patter, patter again.... The dogs began growling.

"That's Mavra," said Burkin.

The footsteps died away.

"You see and hear that they lie," said Ivan Ivanovitch, turning over on the other side, "and they call you a fool for putting up with their lying. You endure insult and humiliation, and dare not openly say that you are on the side of the honest and the free, and you lie and smile yourself; and all that for the sake of a crust of bread, for the sake of a warm corner, for the sake of a wretched little worthless rank in the service. No, one can't go on living like this."

"Well, you are off on another tack now, Ivan Ivanovitch," said the schoolmaster. "Let us go to sleep!"

And ten minutes later Burkin was asleep. But Ivan Ivanovitch kept sighing and turning over from side to side; then he got up, went outside again, and, sitting in the doorway, lighted his pipe.

Anton Chekhov

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia



Anton Pavlovich Chekhov (Russian: АНТОН ПАВЛОВИЧ ЧЕХОВ, pronounced [ɐnˈton ˈpavlɔvʲɪtɕ ˈtɕɛxəf]; 29 January [O.S. 17 January] 1860 – 15 July [O.S. 2 July] 1904) was a Russian short-story writer, playwright and physician, considered to be one of the greatest short-story writers in the history of world literature.^[1] His career as a dramatist produced four classics and his best short stories are held in high esteem by writers and critics.^{[2][3]} Chekhov practised as a doctor throughout most of his literary career: "Medicine is my lawful wife", he once said, "and literature is my mistress."^[4] Chekhov renounced the theatre after the disastrous reception of *The Seagull* in 1896; but the play was revived to acclaim in 1898 by Constantin Stanislavski's Moscow Art Theatre, which subsequently also produced *Uncle Vanya* and

premiered Chekhov's last two plays, *Three Sisters* and *The Cherry Orchard*. These four works present a challenge to the acting ensemble^[5] as well as to audiences, because in place of conventional action Chekhov offers a "theatre of mood" and a "submerged life in the text."^[6]

Chekhov had at first written stories only for financial gain, but as his artistic ambition grew, he made formal innovations which have influenced the evolution of the modern short story.^[7] His originality consists in an early use of the stream-of-consciousness technique, later adopted by James Joyce and other modernists, combined with a disavowal of the moral finality of traditional story structure.^[8] He made no apologies for the difficulties this posed to readers, insisting that the role of an artist was to ask questions, not to answer them.¹

Life

Childhood

Anton Chekhov was born on 29 January 1860, the third of six surviving children, in Taganrog, a port on the Sea of Azov in southern Russia where his father, Pavel Yegorovich Chekhov, the son of a former serf, ran a grocery store. A director of the parish choir, devout Orthodox Christian, and physically abusive father, Pavel Chekhov has been seen by some historians as the model for his son's many portraits of hypocrisy.^[10] Chekhov's mother, Yevgeniya, was an



excellent storyteller who entertained the children with tales of her travels with her cloth-merchant father all over Russia.^{[11][12]} "Our talents we got from our father," Chekhov remembered, "but our soul from our mother."¹ In adulthood, Chekhov criticised his brother Alexander's treatment of his wife and children by reminding him of Pavel's tyranny:

Let me ask you to recall that it was despotism and lying that ruined your mother's youth. Despotism and lying so mutilated our childhood that it's sickening and frightening to think about it. Remember the horror and disgust we felt in those times when Father threw a tantrum at dinner over too much salt in the soup and called Mother a fool!

Chekhov attended a school for Greek boys, followed by the Taganrog gymnasium, now renamed the Chekhov Gymnasium, where he was kept down for a year at fifteen for failing a Greek exam.^[16] He sang at the Greek Orthodox monastery in Taganrog and in his father's choirs. In a letter of 1892, he used the word "suffering" to describe his childhood and recalled:

When my brothers and I used to stand in the middle of the church and sing the trio "May my prayer be exalted", or "The Archangel's Voice", everyone looked at us with emotion and envied our parents, but we at that moment felt like little convicts.^[17]

In 1876, Chekhov's father was declared bankrupt after over-extending his finances building a new house,^[18] and to avoid the debtor's prison fled to Moscow, where his two eldest sons, Alexander and Nikolai, were attending university. The family lived in poverty in Moscow, Chekhov's mother physically and emotionally broken.^[19] Chekhov was left behind to sell the family possessions and finish his education.



Young Chekhov (left)
with brother Nikolai in
1882

Chekhov remained in Taganrog for three more years, boarding with a man called Selivanov who, like Lopakhin in *The Cherry Orchard*, had bailed out the family for the price of their house.^[20] Chekhov had to pay for his own education, which he managed by—among other jobs—private tutoring, catching and selling goldfinches, and selling short sketches to the newspapers.^[21] He sent every ruble he could spare to Moscow, along with humorous letters to cheer up the family.^[21] During this time, he read widely and analytically, including Cervantes, Turgenev, Goncharov, and Schopenhauer;^{[22][23]} and he wrote a full-length comedy drama, *Fatherless*, which his brother Alexander dismissed as "an inexcusable though innocent fabrication."^[24] Chekhov also enjoyed a series of love affairs, one with the wife of a teacher.^[21]

In 1879, Chekhov completed his

schooling and joined his family in Moscow, having gained admission to the medical school at Moscow University.

Early writings

Chekhov now assumed responsibility for the whole family.^[26] To support them and to pay his tuition fees, he daily wrote short, humorous sketches and vignettes of contemporary Russian life, many under pseudonyms such as "Antosha Chekhonte" (Антоша Чехонте) and "Man without a Spleen" (Человек без селезенки). His prodigious output gradually earned him a reputation as a satirical chronicler of Russian street life, and by 1882 he was writing for *Oskolki* (*Fragments*), owned by Nikolai Leikin, one of the leading publishers of the time.^[27] Chekhov's tone at this stage was harsher than that familiar from his mature fiction.^[28]

In 1884, Chekhov qualified as a physician, which he considered his principal profession though he made little money from it and treated the poor for free.^[29] In 1884 and 1885, Chekhov found himself coughing blood, and in 1886 the attacks worsened; but he would not admit tuberculosis to his family and friends,^[30] confessing to Leikin, "I am afraid to submit myself to be sounded by my colleagues."^[30] He continued writing for weekly periodicals, earning enough money to move the family into progressively better accommodation. Early in 1886 he was invited to write for one of the most popular papers in St. Petersburg, *Novoye Vremya* (*New Times*), owned and edited by the millionaire magnate Alexey Suvorin, who paid per line a rate double Leikin's and allowed him three times the space.^[31] Suvorin was to become a lifelong friend, perhaps Chekhov's closest.^{[32][33]}

Before long, Chekhov was attracting literary as well as popular attention. The sixty-four-year-old Dmitry Grigorovich, a celebrated Russian writer of the day, wrote to Chekhov after reading his short story *The Huntsman*,^[34] "You have *real* talent—a talent which places you in the front rank among writers in the new generation." He went on to advise Chekhov to slow down, write less, and concentrate on literary quality.

Chekhov replied that the letter had struck him "like a thunderbolt" and confessed, "I have written my stories the way reporters write up their notes about fires—mechanically, half-consciously, caring nothing about either the reader or myself."^[35] The admission may have done Chekhov a disservice, since early manuscripts reveal that he often wrote with extreme care, continually revising.^[36] Grigorovich's advice nevertheless inspired a more serious, artistic ambition in the twenty-six-year-old. In 1887, with a little string-pulling by Grigorovich, the short story collection *At Dusk* (*V Sumerkakh*) won Chekhov the coveted Pushkin Prize "for the best literary production distinguished by high artistic worth."^[37]

Turning points

That year, exhausted from overwork and ill health, Chekhov took a trip to Ukraine which reawakened him to the beauty of the steppe.^[38] On his return, he began the novella-length short story *The Steppe*, "something rather odd and much too original," eventually published in *Severny Vestnik* (*The Northern Herald*).^[39] In a narrative which drifts with the thought processes of the characters, Chekhov evokes a chaise journey across the steppe through the eyes of a young boy sent to live away from home, his companions a priest and a merchant. *The Steppe*, which has been called a "dictionary of Chekhov's

poetics", represented a significant advance for Chekhov, exhibiting much of the quality of his mature fiction and winning him publication in a literary journal rather than a newspaper.^[40]

In autumn 1887, a theater manager named Korsh commissioned Chekhov to write a play, the result being *Ivanov*, written in a fortnight and produced that November.^[13] Though Chekhov found the experience "sickening", and painted a comic portrait of the chaotic production in a letter to his brother Alexander, the play was a hit and was praised, to Chekhov's bemusement, as a work of originality.^[41] Mikhail Chekhov considered *Ivanov* a key moment in his brother's intellectual development and literary career.^[13] From this period comes an observation of Chekhov's which has become known as "Chekhov's gun", noted by Ilia Gurliand from a conversation: "If in Act I you have a pistol hanging on the wall, then it must fire in the last act."^{[42][43]}

The death of Chekhov's brother Nikolai from tuberculosis in 1889 influenced *A Dreary Story*, finished that September, about a man who confronts the end of a life which he realizes has been without purpose.^{[44][45]} Mikhail Chekhov, who recorded his brother's depression and restlessness after Nikolai's death, was researching prisons at the time as part of his law studies, and Anton Chekhov, in a search for purpose in his own life, himself soon became obsessed with the issue of prison reform.^[13]

Sakhalin

In 1890, Chekhov undertook an arduous journey by train, horse-drawn carriage, and river steamer to the far east of Russia and the katorga, or penal colony, on Sakhalin Island, north of Japan, where he spent three months interviewing thousands of convicts and settlers for a census. The letters Chekhov wrote during the two-and-a-half month journey to Sakhalin are considered to be among his best.^[47] His remarks to his sister about Tomsk were to become notorious.^{[48][49]}

"Tomsk is a very dull town. To judge from the drunkards whose acquaintance I have made, and from the intellectual people who have come to the hotel to pay their respects to me, the inhabitants are very dull, too."^[50]

The inhabitants of Tomsk later retaliated by erecting a mocking statue of Chekhov. What Chekhov witnessed on Sakhalin shocked and angered him, including floggings, embezzlement of supplies, and forced prostitution of women, he wrote, "There were times I felt that I saw before me the extreme limits of man's degradation."^{[51][52]} He was particularly moved by the plight of the children living in the penal colony with their parents. For example:

"On the Amur steamer going to Sakhalin, there was a convict who had murdered his wife and wore fetters on his legs. His daughter, a little girl of six, was with him. I noticed wherever the convict moved the little girl scrambled after him, holding on to his fetters. At night the child slept with the convicts and soldiers all in a heap together."^[53]

Chekhov later concluded that charity and subscription were not the answer, but that the government had a duty to finance humane treatment of the convicts. His findings were



Chekhov at his home in Melikhovo with his dachshund Khina in 1897

published in 1893 and 1894 as *Ostrov Sakhalin (The Island of Sakhalin)*, a work of social science - not literature - worthy and informative rather than brilliant.^{[54][55]}

Chekhov found literary expression for the "Hell of Sakhalin" in his long short story *The Murder*,^[56] the last section of which is set on Sakhalin, where the murderer Yakov loads coal in the night, longing for home.

Melikhovo

In 1892, Chekhov bought the small country estate of Melikhovo, about forty miles south of Moscow, where he lived until 1899 with his family. "It's nice to be a lord," he joked to Shcheglov;^[17] but he took his responsibilities as a landlord seriously and soon made himself useful to the local peasants. As well as organising relief for victims of the famine and cholera outbreaks of 1892, he went on to build three schools, a fire station, and a clinic, and to donate his medical services

to peasants for miles around, despite frequent recurrences of his tuberculosis.^{[10][29][57]}

Mikhail Chekhov, a member of the household at Melikhovo, described the extent of his brother's medical commitments:

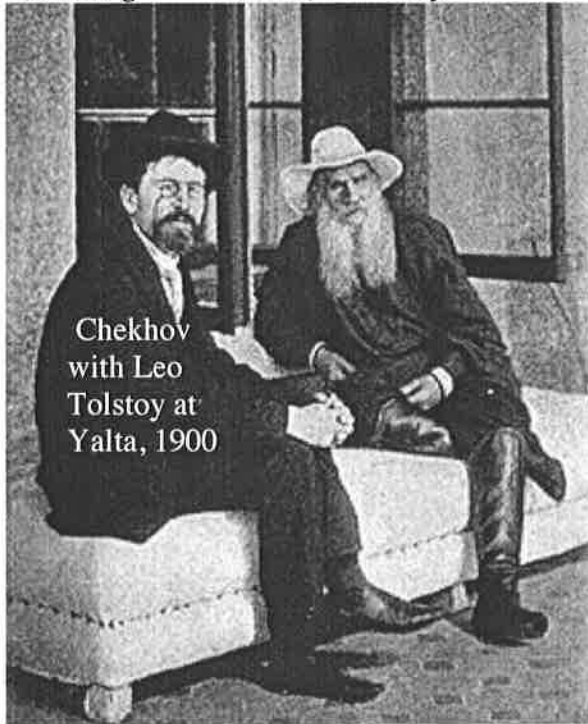
From the first day that Chekhov moved to Melikhovo, the sick began flocking to him from twenty miles around. They came on foot or were brought in carts, and often he was fetched to patients at a distance. Sometimes from early in the morning peasant women and children were standing before his door waiting.^[13]

Chekhov's expenditure on drugs was considerable; but the greatest cost was making journeys of several hours to visit the sick, which reduced his time for writing.^[13] Chekhov's work as a doctor, however, enriched his writing by bringing him into intimate contact with all sections of Russian society: for example, he witnessed at first hand the peasants' unhealthy and cramped living conditions, which he recalled in his short story *Peasants*. Chekhov visited the upper classes as well, recording in his notebook: "Aristocrats? The same ugly bodies and physical uncleanness, the same toothless old age and disgusting death, as with market-women."^[58]

Chekhov began writing his play *The Seagull* in 1894, in a lodge he had built in the orchard at Melikhovo. In the two years since moving to the estate, he had refurbished the house, taken up agriculture and horticulture, tended orchard and pond, and planted many trees, which, according to Mikhail, he "looked after... as though they were his children.

Like Colonel Vershinin in his *Three Sisters*, as he looked at them he dreamed of what they would be like in three or four hundred years."^[13]

The first night of *The Seagull* on 17 October 1896 at the Alexandrinsky Theatre in Petersburg was a fiasco, booed by the audience, and the play's reception stung Chekhov



Chekhov
with Leo
Tolstoy at
Yalta, 1900

into renouncing the theatre.^[59] But the play so impressed the theatre director Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko that he convinced his colleague Constantin Stanislavski to direct it for the innovative Moscow Art Theatre in 1898.^[60] Stanislavski's attention to psychological realism and ensemble playing coaxed the buried subtleties from the text and restored Chekhov's interest in playwriting.^[61] The Art Theatre commissioned more plays from Chekhov and the following year staged *Uncle Vanya*, which Chekhov had completed in 1896.^[62]

Yalta

In March 1897 Chekhov suffered a major hemorrhage of the lungs while on a visit to Moscow and, with great difficulty, was

persuaded to enter a clinic, where the doctors diagnosed tuberculosis on the upper part of his lungs and ordered a change in his manner of life.^[63]

After his father's death in 1898, Chekhov bought a plot of land on the outskirts of Yalta and built a villa there, into which he moved with his mother and sister the following year. Though he planted trees and flowers in Yalta, kept dogs and tame cranes, and received guests such as Leo Tolstoy and Maxim Gorky, Chekhov was always relieved to leave his "hot Siberia" for Moscow or travels abroad. He vowed to move to Taganrog as soon as a water supply was installed there.^{[64][65]} In Yalta he completed two more plays for the Art Theatre, composing with greater difficulty than in the days when he "wrote serenely, the way I eat pancakes now"; he took a year each over *Three Sisters* and *The Cherry Orchard*.^[66]

Chekhov married Olga Knipper—quietly, owing to his horror of weddings—a former protégée and sometime lover of Nemirovich-Danchenko whom he had first met at rehearsals for *The Seagull*.^{[67][68][69]} Up to that point, Chekhov, called "Russia's most elusive literary bachelor",^[70] had preferred passing liaisons and visits to brothels over commitment;^[71] he had once written to Suvorin:

By all means I will be married if you wish it. But on these conditions: everything must be as it has been hitherto—that is, she must live in Moscow while I live in the country, and I will come and see her... give me a wife who, like the moon, won't appear in my sky every day.^[72]

The letter proved prophetic of Chekhov's marital arrangements with Olga: he lived largely at Yalta, she in Moscow, pursuing her acting career. In 1902, Olga suffered a miscarriage; and Donald Rayfield has offered evidence, based on the couple's letters, that conception may have occurred when Chekhov and Olga were apart, although Russian scholars have conclusively refuted that claim.^{[73][74]} The literary legacy of this long-distance marriage is a correspondence which preserves gems of theatre history, including shared complaints about Stanislavski's directing methods and Chekhov's advice to Olga about performing in his plays.^[75]

In Yalta, Chekhov wrote one of his most famous stories, *The Lady with the Dog* (also called *Lady with Lapdog*),^[76] which depicts what at first seems a casual liaison between a married man and a married woman in Yalta. Neither expects anything lasting from the encounter, but they find themselves drawn back to each other, risking the security of their family lives.

Death

By May 1904, Chekhov was terminally ill with tuberculosis. Mikhail Chekhov recalled that "everyone who saw him secretly thought the end was not far off, but the nearer [he] was to the end, the less he seemed to realise it."^[13] On 3 June he set off with Olga for the German spa town of Badenweiler in the Black Forest, from where he wrote outwardly jovial letters to his sister Masha describing the food and surroundings and assuring her and his mother that he was getting better. In his last letter, he complained about the way the German women dressed.^[78]

Chekhov's death has become one of "the great set pieces of literary history",^[79] retold, embroidered, and fictionalised many times since, notably in the short story *Errand* by Raymond Carver. In 1908, Olga wrote this account of her husband's last moments:

Anton sat up unusually straight and said loudly and clearly (although he knew almost no German): *Ich sterbe* ("I'm dying"). The doctor calmed him, took a syringe, gave him an injection of camphor, and ordered champagne. Anton took a full glass, examined it, smiled at me and said: "It's a long time since I drank champagne." He drained it, lay quietly on his left side, and I just had time to run to him and lean across the bed and call to him, but he had stopped breathing and was sleeping peacefully as a child...^[80]

Legacy

A few months before he died, Chekhov told the writer Ivan Bunin he thought people might go on reading him for seven years. "Why seven?" asked Bunin. "Well, seven and a half," Chekhov replied. "That's not bad. I've got six years to live."^[83]

Always modest, Chekhov could hardly have imagined the extent of his posthumous reputation. The ovations for *The Cherry Orchard* in the year of his death showed him how high he had risen in the affection of the Russian public—by then he was second in



Chekhov and
Olga, 1901, on
honeymoon

literary celebrity only to Tolstoy,^[84] who outlived him by six years—but after his death, Chekhov's fame soon spread further afield. Constance Garnett's translations won him an English-language readership and the admiration of writers such as James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and Katherine Mansfield. The issues surrounding the close similarities between Mansfield's 1910 story *The Child Who Was Tired* and Chekhov's *Sleepy* are summarised in William H. New's *Reading Mansfield and Metaphors of Reform*^[85] The Russian critic D.S. Mirsky, who lived in England, explained Chekhov's popularity in that country by his "unusually complete rejection of what we may call the heroic values."^[86] In Russia itself, Chekhov's drama fell out of fashion after the revolution but was later adapted to the Soviet agenda, with the character Lopakhin, for example, reinvented as a hero of the new order, taking an axe to the cherry orchard.^{[87][88]}

One of the first non-Russians to praise Chekhov's plays was George Bernard Shaw, who subtitled his *Heartbreak House* "A Fantasia in the Russian Manner on English Themes" and noted similarities between the predicament of the British landed class and that of their Russian counterparts as depicted by Chekhov: "the same nice people, the same utter futility."^[89]

In America, Chekhov's reputation began its rise slightly later, partly through the influence of Stanislavski's system of acting, with its notion of subtext: "Chekhov often expressed his thought not in speeches," wrote Stanislavski, "but in pauses or between the lines or in replies consisting of a single word... the characters often feel and think things not expressed in the lines they speak."^{[90][91]} The Group Theatre, in particular, developed the subtextual approach to drama, influencing generations of American playwrights, screenwriters, and actors, including Clifford Odets, Elia Kazan and, in particular, Lee Strasberg. In turn, Strasberg's Actors Studio and the "Method" acting approach influenced many actors, including Marlon Brando and Robert De Niro, though by then the Chekhov tradition may have been distorted by a preoccupation with realism.^[92] In 1981, the playwright Tennessee Williams adapted *The Seagull* as *The Notebook of Trigorin*.

Despite Chekhov's eminence as a playwright, some writers believe his short stories represent the greater achievement.^[93] Raymond Carver, who wrote the short story *Errand* about Chekhov's death, believed Chekhov the greatest of all short-story writers:

Chekhov's stories are as wonderful (and necessary) now as when they first appeared. It is not only the immense number of stories he wrote—for few, if any, writers have ever done more—it is the awesome frequency with which he produced masterpieces, stories that shrive us as well as delight and move us, that lay bare our emotions in ways only true art can accomplish.^[94]

Ernest Hemingway, another writer influenced by Chekhov, was more grudging: "Chekhov wrote about 6 good stories. But he was an amateur writer."^[95] And Vladimir Nabokov once complained of Chekhov's "medley of dreadful prosaisms, ready-made epithets, repetitions."^[96] But he also declared *The Lady with the Dog* "one of the greatest stories ever written" and described Chekhov as writing "the way one person relates to another the most important things in his life, slowly and yet without a break, in a slightly subdued voice."^[97]

For the writer William Boyd, Chekhov's breakthrough was to abandon what William Gerhardie called the "event plot" for something more "blurred, interrupted, mauled or otherwise tampered with by life."^[98]

Virginia Woolf mused on the unique quality of a Chekhov story in *The Common Reader* (1925):

But is it the end, we ask? We have rather the feeling that we have overrun our signals; or it is as if a tune had stopped short without the expected chords to close it. These stories are inconclusive, we say, and proceed to frame a criticism based upon the assumption that stories ought to conclude in a way that we recognise. In so doing we raise the question of our own fitness as readers. Where the tune is familiar and the end emphatic—lovers united, villains discomfited, intrigues exposed—as it is in most Victorian fiction, we can scarcely go wrong, but where the tune is unfamiliar and the end a note of interrogation or merely the information that they went on talking, as it is in Tchekov, we need a very daring and alert sense of literature to make us hear the tune, and in particular those last notes which complete the harmony.^[99]