CLASSICS TO GO

REMINISCENCES OF ANTON CHEKHOV

MAXIM GORKY, ALEXANDER KUPRIN
ALEKSEEVICH BUNIN

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ANTON CHEKHOV
FRAGMENTS OF RECOLLECTIONS
BY
MAXIM GORKY

ONCE he invited me to the village Koutchouk-Koy where he had a tiny strip of land and a white, two-storied house. There, while showing me his “estate,” he began to speak with animation: “If I had plenty of money, I should build a sanatorium here for invalid village teachers. You know, I would put up a large, bright building—very bright, with large windows and lofty rooms. I would have a fine library, different musical instruments, bees, a vegetable garden, an orchard…. There would be lectures on agriculture, mythology…. Teachers ought to know everything, everything, my dear fellow.”

He was suddenly silent, coughed, looked at me out of the corners of his eyes, and smiled that tender, charming smile of his which attracted one so irresistibly to him and made one listen so attentively to his words.

“Does it bore you to listen to my fantasies? I do love to talk of it…. If you knew how badly the Russian village needs a nice, sensible, educated teacher! We ought in Russia to give the teacher particularly good conditions, and it ought to be done as quickly as possible. We ought to realize that without a wide education of the people, Russia will collapse, like a house built of badly baked bricks. A teacher must be an artist, in love with his calling; but with us he is a journeyman, ill educated, who goes to the village to teach children as though he were going into exile. He is starved, crushed, terrorized by the fear of losing his daily bread. But he ought to be the first man in the village; the peasants ought to recognize him as a power, worthy of attention and respect; no one should dare to shout at him or humiliate him

personally, as with us every one does—the village constable, the rich shop-keeper, the priest, the rural police commissioner, the school guardian, the councilor, and that official who has the title of school-inspector, but who cares nothing for the improvement of education and only sees that the circulars of his chiefs are carried out.... It is ridiculous to pay in farthings the man who has to educate the people. It is intolerable that he should walk in rags, shiver with cold in damp and draughty schools, catch cold, and about the age of thirty get laryngitis, rheumatism, or tuberculosis. We ought to be ashamed of it. Our teacher, for eight or nine months in the year, lives like a hermit: he has no one to speak a word to; without company, books, or amusements, he is growing stupid, and, if he invites his colleagues to visit him, then he becomes politically suspect —a stupid word with which crafty men frighten fools. All this is disgusting; it is the mockery of a man who is doing a great and tremendously important work.... Do you know, whenever I see a teacher, I feel ashamed for him, for his timidity, and because he is badly dressed ... it seems to me that for the teacher's wretchedness I am myself to blame—I mean it."

He was silent, thinking; and then, waving his hand, he said gently: "This Russia of ours is such an absurd, clumsy country."

A shadow of sadness crossed his beautiful eyes; little rays of wrinkles surrounded them and made them look still more meditative. Then, looking round, he said jestingly: "You see, I have fired off at you a complete leading article from a radical paper. Come, I'll give you tea to reward your patience."

That was characteristic of him, to speak so earnestly, with such warmth and sincerity, and then suddenly to laugh at himself and his speech. In that sad and gentle smile one felt the subtle skepticism of the man who knows the value

of words and dreams; and there also flashed in the smile a lovable modesty and delicate sensitiveness….

We walked back slowly in silence to the house. It was a clear, hot day; the waves sparkled under the bright rays of the sun; down below one heard a dog barking joyfully. Chekhov took my arm, coughed, and said slowly: “It is shameful and sad, but true: there are many men who envy the dogs.”

And he added immediately with a laugh: “To-day I can only make feeble speeches … It means that I'm getting old.”

I often heard him say: “You know, a teacher has just come here—he's ill, married … couldn't you do something for him? I have made arrangements for him for the time being.” Or again: “Listen, Gorky, there is a teacher here who would like to meet you. He can't go out, he's ill. Won't you come and see him? Do.” Or: “Look here, the women teachers want books to be sent to them.”

Sometimes I would find that “teacher” at his house; usually he would be sitting on the edge of his chair, blushing at the consciousness of his own awkwardness, in the sweat of his brow picking and choosing his words, trying to speak smoothly and “educatedly”; or, with the ease of manner of a person who is morbidly shy, he would concentrate himself upon the effort not to appear stupid in the eyes of an author, and he would simply belabor Anton Chekhov with a hail of questions which had never entered his head until that moment.

Anton Chekhov would listen attentively to the dreary, incoherent speech; now and again a smile came into his sad eyes, a little wrinkle appeared on his forehead, and then, in his soft, lusterless voice, he began to speak simple, clear, homely words, words which somehow or other immediately made his questioner simple: the teacher stopped trying to be clever, and therefore immediately became more clever and interesting….

I remember one teacher, a tall, thin man with a yellow, hungry face and a long, hooked nose which drooped gloomily towards his chin. He sat opposite Anton Chekhov and, looking fixedly into Chekhov's face with his black eyes, said in a melancholy bass voice:

“From such impressions of existence within the space of the tutorial session there comes a psychical conglomeration which crushes every possibility of an objective attitude towards the surrounding universe. Of course, the universe is nothing but our presentation of it.…”

And he rushed headlong into philosophy, and he moved over its surface like a drunkard skating on ice.

“Tell me,” Chekhov put in quietly and kindly, “who is that teacher in your district who beats the children?”

The teacher sprang from his chair and waved his arms indignantly: “Whom do you mean? Me? Never! Beating?”

He snorted with indignation.

“Don't get excited,” Anton Chekhov went on, smiling reassuringly; “I'm not speaking of you. But I remember—I read it in the newspapers—there is some one in your district who beats the children.”

The teacher sat down, wiped his perspiring face, and, with a sigh of relief, said in his deep bass:—

“It's true ... there was such a case ... it was Makarov. You know, it's not surprising. It's cruel, but explicable. He's married ... has four children ... his wife is ill ... himself consumptive ... his salary is 20 roubles, the school like a cellar, and the teacher has but a single room—under such circumstances you will give a thrashing to an angel of God for no fault ... and the children—they're far from angels, believe me.”

And the man, who had just been mercilessly belaboring Chekhov with his store of clever words, suddenly, ominously wagging his hooked nose, began to speak simple, weighty, clear-cut words, which illuminated, like a fire, the terrible, accursed truth about the life of the Russian village.