Personal Recollections of Anton Pavlovitch Chekhov

Maxim Gorky

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I BELIEVE that every man when in the presence of Anton Pavlovitch felt the desire of being simpler, truer, more like his natural self, and I observed many times how people threw off the gaudy attire of bookish phrases and all the other cheap finery of high–sounding, bombastic words in which our Russian loves to adorn himself, like the savage in his fish–teeth and shells and feathers, in the foolish desire of aping the Europeans. Anton Pavlovitch heartily disliked fish–teeth and cocks' feathers. In fact, everything striking, gaudy and foreign donned by some one to "give himself additional importance" irritated and threw him into confusion. And I have noticed that every time he met an overdressed, bombastic person he felt inclined to free him from his burdensome and unnecessary tinsel trappings, which distorted the natural face and living soul of his interlocutor. All his life Anton Pavlovitch lived on the wealth of his soul; he was always his natural self and kept himself internally free, not taking into consideration what others may have expected of him or others of less delicacy demanded for a moment. He disliked conversations on "high" themes—the sort of conversations with which our dear Russian generally loves to amuse himself, forgetting that it is ridiculous to speak of costly clothing which we are to have in the future when at present we are lacking even a decent pair of trousers.

Himself beautiful and simple, he loved simplicity, reality and sincerity, and he had a special way of making those with whom he came in contact simpler and better.

I remember that once he was visited by three richly dressed ladies. After filling his rooms with the rustle of their silk skirts and strong perfumery, they decorously seated themselves opposite their host, feigning that they were very much interested in politics, and began to "put questions."

"Anton Pavlovitch, with what do you suppose this war will end?"

Anton Pavlovitch coughed slightly and, after thinking for a moment, replied in his serious, gentle voice:

"In all probability—in peace."

"Well, yes—of course! But who will win? The Greeks or the Turks?"

"It seems to me that the one who is stronger is sure to win."

"And who, in your opinion, is the stronger?" the ladies asked, vying with each other.

"Those who are more intelligent and better fed."

"Oh, how witty!" exclaimed one lady.

"And whom do you like more, Anton Pavlovitch, the Greeks or the Turks?"

Anton Pavlovitch looked at her and replied with a kind, gentle smile:

"I like marmalade—don't you?"

"Very!" she exclaimed vivaciously.

"Of apricots!" sedately corroborated another.

And the third added with great relish, half closing her eyes: "It has a delicious aroma!"

And all three began to speak with great animation of marmalade, thereby showing that on this particular question they possessed a splendid erudition and a thorough knowledge of the subject. It was evident that they were glad of the opportunity not to strain their minds in feigning an interest in either Greek or Turk, neither of whom they had ever thought of until the very moment.

On leaving Anton Pavlovitch they said merrily:

"We shall send you some nice marmalade!"

"You have had a nice conversation!" I remarked after they had left.

"It is necessary that every one should speak his own language," he laughingly said.

On another occasion I found with him a young and very handsome assistant district attorney. He was standing before Chekhov and speaking in a very animated way, shaking his curly head:

"In your story, 'The Malefactor,' you have brought before us a very intricate question. If I should acknowledge

in Denise Grigorieff an objective vicious will, conscious of the crime he commits, I would feel compelled to put him into jail without the least scruple, because that is what the interests of society demand. But he is a savage; he had committed the crime unconsciously, and I feel sorry for him! But if I should deal with him as with a creature who acted without understanding and therefore treat him with clemency, what guarantee can I give to society, whose interests I am bound to defend, that this Denise will not again meddle with the rails and thereby cause a terrible disaster? This is the question! What, therefore, is to be done?"

He stopped, threw back his shoulders and stared scrutinizingly into the face of Anton Pavlovitch. He was dressed in a brand new uniform and his breast buttons shone as self–consciously and stupidly as the eyes in the neat little face of the youthful zealot of justice.

"If I were the judge," Anton Pavlovitch replied earnestly, "I would acquit Denise."

"But on what ground?"

"I would simply say to him: 'See here, Denise, you have not yet ripenedinto the type of a conscious criminal; go and ripen!"

The jurist laughed, but immediately continued with his former pompous earnestness:

"No, my revered Anton Pavlovitch. The question you put forth in your story can only be decided in the interest of society, whose life and property I am called upon to defend. Denise is a savage, yes, but at the same time he is also a criminal—this is the truth!"

"How do you like the gramophone?" Chekhov suddenly asked, very kindly.

"Oh, very much indeed! It is a wonderful invention," the youth replied vivaciously.

"And I cannot bear it!" Anton Pavlovitch sadly confessed.

"Why?"

"Because it sings and speaks without feeling anything, and it all comes out like a caricature—dead. Are you interested in photography?"

It came out that he was a passionate admirer of the photographers' art and he immediately began to speak of it with great enthusiasm, entirely forgetting the gramophone, tho he had so much in common with that "wonderful invention," as Chekhov so cleverly and truly observed. And once more I saw peeping from out the uniform a funny little man who as yet felt himself as much at home in the position he occupied in life as a young pup feels at the chase.

After escorting his guest to the door Anton Pavlovitch said gloomily:

"And such a pimple on the face of justice is deciding people's destinies!"

And after a moment's silence he added: "It seems to me that district attorneys love to angle fish."

He possessed the art of detecting and bring out triviality—an art attainable only to men of very high demands upon life, and which is created only through a passionate desire that people should be simple and beautifully harmonious. Triviality always found in him a keen and cruel judge.

Some one said in his presence that a certain publisher of a popular magazine, a man who always talked of the necessity of love and mercy toward others, had without any reason insulted a conductor of a railroad and generally treated his subordinates very badly.

"Well! Is that anything surprising?" said Anton Pavlovitch, frowning and smiling at the same moment. "Is he not an aristocrat—an educated person? Did he not attend the seminary? Has not his father worn bast–shoes and does he not wear patent leather boots?"

And in the tone in which he pronounced these words was something which at once made the "aristocrat" appear both insignificant and ridiculous.

"A very talented man!" he once said, speaking of a certain journalist. "He writes so nobly, always, and compassionately—sweetly—sweetly—calls his wife in the presence of strangers a fool—keeps his servants in a damp room and complains that the chambermaid suffers with rheumatism."

"Do you like N. N., Anton Pavlovitch?"

"Yes, very much. A pleasant man," Chekhov agreed, coughing. "He knows everything—reads much; he swallowed three books of mine. He is very absent–minded. To–day he tells you that you are a splendid fellow, and the very next day he will inform some one that you are cheating your servants out of their wages, and that you have stolen the silk socks from the husband of your mistress—black ones with blue stripes."

Some one complained in his presence of the tediousness and heaviness of the "serious" sections of the larger

magazines.

"Do not read the articles," Anton Pavlovitch persuasively advised. "They are the so–called friendly literature—a literature between comrades. The authors of these articles are Messrs. Krasnov (red), Bielov (white), and Chernov (black). One writes an article, the otherobjects to it, and the third reconciles the contradictions of both. It looks very much like a game of whist, a dummy for the fourth partner in the game. And not one of the three of them ever asked himself the simple question, why the reader needs all this.

"Critics are very similar to the gad–flies which are always hindering the horse in his work," he used to say with the clever smile of his. "The horse plows and strains its every muscle like the strings on a counter–bass; suddenly the gad–fly descends upon his back and begins to tickle him and to buzz, and the poor horse frets and waves his tail. What does the gad–fly buzz about? It hardly knows itself. It simply possesses a restless nature and wants to introduce itself to every one's notice—'know ye that I also am a resident of this globe! As you can well hear, I can even buzz—I can buzz about everything!' For the last twenty–five years I have been diligently reading what the critics had to say about my stories and I cannot remember to have found one useful indication or one good advice in all these years. Only once Skabichevsky made an impression on me when he wrote that I would 'die in a drunken state, somewhere under a hedge.'"

There always lurked in his gray, sad eyes a fine, ironical smile, but at times they could become cold, sharp and hard; at such times his flexible, soulful voice sounded harder, and it seemed to me at such moments that this modest, delicate man would stand up for his rights and defend them against an evilly disposed power, if he should find it necessary, with vigor and strength, to the very last breath.

At times it seemed to me that there was in his relation to people a feeling of utter hopelessness, something akin to a cold, quiet despair.

"A Russian is a remarkable being!" he once said to me. "He is very much like a sieve; everything goes through him. In his youth he greedily fills his soul with everything he can lay his hands on and at the age of thirty all that remains of it is a kind of grayish rubbish. To live well, worthy of a human being, one must labor. Work lovingly, faithfully—and with us nobody is able to do this. An architect sits down to the card–table or spends his time in the wings of the theaters as soon as he has succeeded in constructing two or three decent buildings. A doctor as quick as he succeeds in building up a lucrative practice for himself loses all interest in science and never reads anything aside from the 'News in Therapeutics.' And at forty he is earnestly convinced that all diseases emanate from chills. I have never yet met an official who to some extent understood the importance of his work. He generally sits at the capital or Government–city and composes papers which are sent to Zmiev or Smargon for execution. But he thinks as little of those whom his papers at Zmiev or Smargon deprive of their freedom as an atheist thinks of the agonies of purgatory. A lawyer, after he once makes a name for himself in a successfully conducted law suit, does not trouble himself any longer with defending just cases; he takes up the defense of rich corporations, plays on the races, eats oysters and represents himself as a connoisseur of fine arts. An actor, after rendering a few decent rôles, gives up studying any further, dons a cylinder hat and proclaims himself a genius. Russia as a whole is a land of greedy, indolent people, who eat much and daintily, drink, love to sleep in the daytime and snore while so occupied. They marry because a wife keeps the house in order, and keep a mistress because it elevates them in the eyes of society. Their psychology is purely canine; if you beat them they hide in their kennels, yelping softly. If you caress them they lie upon their backs with raised paws and a wagging tail."

His words sounded cold and con–temptuous, fraught with a deep sadness. Despising, he also pitied, and if I happened to rail at some one in his presence Anton Pavlovitch would immediately take up his defense.

"Don't! Why should you? And he an old man; he is almost seventy."

Or:

"He is still so young—it is only because of his foolishness."

And when he spoke in this way I did not see any aversion in his face.

In youth triviality seems only ludicrous and insignificant, but it slowly envelops its victim in its grayish mist, penetrates his brain, pollutes his blood like a poison or the fumes of charcoal, and the man soon becomes like an old sign–board eaten through and through with rust; it looks as if something was painted upon it once upon a time, but now it is impossible to distinguish what it was.

Anton Pavlovitch Chekhov had already shown in his very first stories that he was able to discover in the murky sea of triviality its tragically somber jokes; one has only to read carefully his "humoristic" stories to be

convinced how much cruelty and depravity the author saw and hid with modest shame under the exterior of droll and comical situations.

He was modestly chaste and could not permit himself to say to people loudly and frankly, "Do be more decent!" vainly hoping that they might themselves perceive the necessity of it. Hating everything trivial and dirty, he depicted the abominations of life in the noble and lofty language of a poet and with the gentle, ironical smile of the humorist. And under the beautiful exterior of his stories is hardly noticeable the full bitterness of the reproach conveyed by them.

Reading, the daughter of the respected public laughs heartily, hardly noticing the disgusting derision of the overfed "Barin" toward a poor, forlorn creature, alone in a foreign land, among strange people and surroundings. And in almost every one of Chekhov's humoristic stories I hear the same low, deep sigh of a pure, truly human heart, a hopeless sigh of compassion toward people who cannot respect their human dignity and resistlessly obey a brutal power, living like slaves and believing in nothing, aside from the necessity of gulping down every day as much as possible of the fat cabbage–soup, and who feel nothing beside the fear of some one strong and impudent who may fall upon them and give them a sound beating.

No one understood as keenly and clearly as did Chekhov the tragedy of a petty life, and no one before him so mercilessly and truly depicted to the people the picture of the sad and shameless life they lead in their murky, monotonous, everyday existence.

His greatest enemy was triviality; he wrestled with it all his life, he laughed at it and wrote about it with an unimpassioned, sharp pen. He could find the moldiness of triviality, even where everything seemed on the first glance to be very well arranged, with comfort and even with certain splendor—and triviality revenged itself upon its worst enemy by playing on the dead a disgustingly vulgar prank by placing his body—the body of a poet—in a car "For the transportation of fresh oysters."

That dirty green car seems to me nothing less than the great triumphant grin of triviality over its worn–out enemy, and in the countless "recollections" of the daily press I perceive the hypocritical sorrowfulness beyond which I feel the cold, evil–smelling breath of that same triviality, secretly rejoicing in the early death of its enemy.

Reading the stories of Anton Pavlovitch Chekhov one feels as on a sad day in late fall, when the air is so transparent and the bare trees, narrow houses and gray looking people are so sharplyoutlined in it. Everything seems so strange and lonely, motionless and helpless. The deep blue distances are deserted and blend readily with the pale sky, breathing with melancholy cold upon the earth covered with frozen mud. The mind of the author, like the late fall sun, lights up with cruel clearness the broken roads, crooked streets, narrow, dirty houses in which pitiful little people are suffocating with ennui and indolence, filling their houses with a senseless, sleepy bustle.

Here is "The Little Soul" running uneasily here and there, a dear, gentle little woman who can love so much and so lavishly. She may be stricken in the face and she will not even dare to groan aloud, gentle slave. Side by side with her sadly stands Olga from "The Three Sisters." She also loves much, and patiently obeys all the caprices of the depraved and vulgar wife of her indolent brother; the lives of her sisters are ruined before her eyes and she weeps and cannot be of any help to anybody. She has not even one vigorous word of protest in her heart against all these iniquities.

Here is the tearful Ranevskaia and the other former owners of the "Cherry Grove"—egotistical like children and decrepit like old people. They have missed dying at the right time and are whining, not able to comprehend what is happening around them—parasites, without any power of finding a new support for themselves which would keep them alive with its live blood. The insignificant student Trofimov, who can speak so nicely on the necessity of labor, idles away his time, seeking a cure for his ennui in his foolish derision of Varia, who works her fingers to the bone for the benefit of an indolent crew.

Vershinin dreams of the beautiful life people will lead in three hundred years, without seeing that all around him everything is going to ruin; that under his very eyes Solenoy is ready, from sheer foolishness and out of ennui, to kill the pitiful Baron Tuzendbach.

Before the eyes of the reader pass an endless file of slaves of love, of foolishness and indolence, of greed of good things of the earth—slaves of a dark fear of life. They walk with a vague fear and fill life with incoherent speeches of the future, feeling that in the present they are out of place.

At times among the grayish crowd a shout is heard; this means that Ivanov or Treplov at last understood what he ought to do and—died.

Many of them dream so beautifully of how nice life will be after two hundred years have passed, and no one even thinks of putting to himself the simple question: But who will make that life beautiful if we will spend all our time in idle dreams?

Past all this crowd of helpless people went a great, wise, attentive man; he looked upon all these tedious inhabitants of the land of his birth and said with a sad smile, in a gentle but reproachful tone, with a hopeless sadness in face and heart, in a beautiful, sincere voice:

"You live very badly, gentlemen! It is a shame to live so!"

ST. PETERSBURG, RUSSIA.