Plays by Anton Chekhov, Second Series

Anton Pavlovich Chekhov

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PLAYS BY ANTON CHEKHOV, SECOND SERIES

By Anton Chekhov

Translated, with an Introduction, by Julius West

[The First Series Plays have been previously published by Project Gutenberg in etext numbers: 1753 through 1756]

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INTRODUCTION

The last few years have seen a large and generally unsystematic mass of translations from the Russian flung at the heads and hearts of English readers. The ready acceptance of Chekhov has been one of the few successful features of this irresponsible output. He has been welcomed by British critics with something like affection. Bernard

Shaw has several times remarked: “Every time I see a play by Chekhov, I want to chuck all my own stuff into the fire.” Others, having no such valuable property to sacrifice on the altar of Chekhov, have not hesitated to place him side by side with Ibsen, and the other established institutions of the new theatre. For these reasons it is pleasant to be able to chronicle the fact that, by way of contrast with the casual treatment normally handed out to Russian authors, the publishers are issuing the complete dramatic works of this author. In 1912 they brought out a volume containing four Chekhov plays, translated by Marian Fell. All the dramatic works not included in her volume are to be found in the present one. With the exception of Chekhov’s masterpiece, “The Cherry Orchard” (translated by the late Mr. George Calderon in 1912), none of these plays have been previously published in book form in England or America.

It is not the business of a translator to attempt to outdo all others in singing the praises of his raw material. This is a dangerous process and may well lead, as it led Mr. Calderon, to drawing the reader’s attention to points of beauty not to be found in the original. A few bibliographical details are equally necessary, and permissible, and the elementary principles of Chekhov criticism will also be found useful.

The very existence of “The High Road” (1884); probably the earliest of its author’s plays, will be unsuspected by English readers. During Chekhov’s lifetime it a sort of family legend, after his death it became a family mystery. A copy was finally discovered only last year in the Censor’s office, yielded up, and published. It had been sent in 1885 under the nom-de-plume “A. Chekhonte,” and it had failed to pass. The Censor, of the time being had scrawled his opinion on the manuscript, “a depressing and dirty piece,--cannot be licensed.” The

name of the gentleman who held this view--Kaiser von Kugelgen--gives another reason for the educated Russian's low opinion of German-sounding institutions. Baron von Tuzenbach, the satisfactory person in "The Three Sisters," it will be noted, finds it as well, while he is trying to secure the favours of Irina, to declare that his German ancestry is fairly remote. This is by way of parenthesis. "The High Road," found after thirty years, is a most interesting document to the lover of Chekhov. Every play he wrote in later years was either a one-act farce or a four-act drama. [Note: "The Swan Song" may occur as an exception. This, however, is more of a Shakespeare recitation than anything else, and so neither here nor there.]

In "The High Road" we see, in an embryonic form, the whole later method of the plays--the deliberate contrast between two strong characters (Bortsov and Merik in this case), the careful individualization of each person in a fairly large group by way of an introduction to the main theme, the concealment of the catastrophe, germ-wise, in the actual character of the characters, and the of a distinctive group-atmosphere. It need scarcely be stated that "The High Road" is not a "dirty" piece according to Russian or to German standards; Chekhov was incapable of writing a dirty play or story. For the rest, this piece differs from the others in its presentation, not of Chekhov's favourite middle-classes, but of the moujik, nourishing, in a particularly stuffy atmosphere, an intense mysticism and an equally intense thirst for vodka.

"The Proposal" (1889) and "The Bear" (1890) may be taken as good examples of the sort of humour admired by the average Russian. The latter play, in another translation, was put on as a curtain-raiser to a

cinematograph entertainment at a London theatre in 1914; and had quite a pleasant reception from a thoroughly Philistine audience. The humour is very nearly of the variety most popular over here, the psychology is a shade subtler. The Russian novelist or dramatist takes to psychology as some of his fellow-countrymen take to drink; in doing this he achieves fame by showing us what we already know, and at the same time he kills his own creative power. Chekhov just escaped the tragedy of suicide by introspection, and was only enabled to do this by the possession of a sense of humour. That is why we should not regard “The Bear,” “The Wedding,” or “The Anniversary” as the work of a merely humorous young man, but as the saving graces which made perfect “The Cherry Orchard.”

“The Three Sisters” (1901) is said to act better than any other of Chekhov’s plays, and should surprise an English audience exceedingly. It and “The Cherry Orchard” are the tragedies of doing nothing. The three sisters have only one desire in the world, to go to Moscow and live there. There is no reason on earth, economic, sentimental, or other, why they should not pack their bags and take the next train to Moscow. But they will not do it. They cannot do it. And we know perfectly well that if they were transplanted thither miraculously, they would be extremely unhappy as soon as ever the excitement of the miracle had worn off. In the other play Mme. Ranevsky can be saved from ruin if she will only consent to a perfectly simple step--the sale of an estate. She cannot do this, is ruined, and thrown out into the unsympathetic world. Chekhov is the dramatist, not of action, but of inaction. The tragedy of inaction is as overwhelming, when we understand it, as the tragedy of an Othello, or a Lear, crushed by the wickedness of others. The former is being

enacted daily, but we do not stage it, we do not know how. But who shall deny that the base of almost all human unhappiness is just this inaction, manifesting itself in slovenliness of thought and execution, education, and ideal?

The Russian, painfully conscious of his own weakness, has accepted this point of view, and regards “The Cherry Orchard” as its master-study in dramatic form. They speak of the palpitating hush which fell upon the audience of the Moscow Art Theatre after the first fall of the curtain at the first performance--a hush so intense as to make Chekhov’s friends undergo the initial emotions of assisting at a vast theatrical failure. But the silence ryes almost a sob, to be followed, when overcome, by an epic applause. And, a few months later, Chekhov died.

This volume and that of Marian Fell--with which it is uniform--contain all the dramatic works of Chekhov. It considered not worth while to translate a few fragments published posthumously, or a monologue “On the Evils of Tobacco”--a half humorous lecture by “the husband of his wife;” which begins “Ladies, and in some respects, gentlemen,” as this is hardly dramatic work. There is also a very short skit on the efficiency of provincial fire brigades, which was obviously not intended for the stage and has therefore been omitted.

Lastly, the scheme of transliteration employed has been that, generally speaking, recommended by the Liverpool School of Russian Studies. This is distinctly the best of those in the field, but as it would compel one, e.g., to write a popular female name, “Marya,” I have not treated it absolute respect. For the sake of uniformity with

Fell’s volume, the author’s name is spelt Tchekoff on the title-page and cover.

J. W.

RUSSIAN WEIGHTS AND MEASURES

AND MONEY EMPLOYED IN THE PLAYS, WITH ENGLISH EQUIVALENTS

1 verst = 3600 feet = 2/3 mile (almost)

1 arshin = 28 inches

1 dessiatin = 2.7 acres

1 copeck = 1/4 d

1 rouble = 100 copecks = 2s. 1d.

ON THE HIGH ROAD

A DRAMATIC STUDY

CHARACTERS

TIHON EVSTIGNEYEV, the proprietor of a inn on the main road

SEMYON SERGEYEVITCH BORTSOV, a ruined landowner

MARIA EGOROVNA, his wife

SAVVA, an aged pilgrim

NAZAROVNA and EFIMOVNA, women pilgrims

FEDYA, a labourer
EGOR MERIK, a tramp
KUSMA, a driver
POSTMAN
BORTSOV'S WIFE'S COACHMAN
PILGRIMS, CATTLE-DEALERS, ETC.

The action takes place in one of the provinces of Southern Russia

[The scene is laid in TIHON'S bar. On the right is the bar-counter and shelves with bottles. At the back is a door leading out of the house. Over it, on the outside, hangs a dirty red lantern. The floor and the forms, which stand against the wall, are closely occupied by pilgrims and passers-by. Many of them, for lack of space, are sleeping as they sit. It is late at night. As the curtain rises thunder is heard, and lightning is seen through the door.]

[TIHON is behind the counter. FEDYA is half-lying in a heap on one of the forms, and is quietly playing on a concertina. Next to him is BORTSOV, wearing a shabby summer overcoat. SAVVA, NAZAROVNA, and EFIMOVNA are stretched out on the floor by the benches.]

EFIMOVNA. [To NAZAROVNA] Give the old man a nudge dear! Can't get any answer out of him.

NAZAROVNA. [Lifting the corner of a cloth covering of SAVVA'S face] Are you alive or are you dead, you holy man?

SAVVA. Why should I be dead? I'm alive, mother! [Raises himself on his elbow] Cover up my feet, there's a saint! That's it. A bit more on the right one. That's it, mother. God be good to us.

NAZAROVNA. [Wrapping up SAVVA'S feet] Sleep, little father.

SAVVA. What sleep can I have? If only I had the patience to endure this pain, mother; sleep's quite another matter. A sinner doesn't deserve to be given rest. What's that noise, pilgrim-woman?

NAZAROVNA. God is sending a storm. The wind is wailing, and the rain is pouring down, pouring down. All down the roof and into the windows like dried peas. Do you hear? The windows of heaven are opened... [Thunder] Holy, holy, holy...

FEDYA. And it roars and thunders, and rages, sad there's no end to it! Hoooo... it's like the noise of a forest.... Hoooo.... The wind is wailing like a dog.... [Shrinking back] It's cold! My clothes are wet, it's all coming in through the open door... you might put me through a wringer.... [Plays softly] My concertina's damp, and so there's no music for you, my Orthodox brethren, or else I'd give you such a concert, my word!--Something marvellous! You can have a quadrille, or a polka, if you like, or some Russian dance for two.... I can do them all. In the town, where I was an attendant at the Grand Hotel, I couldn't make any money, but I did wonders on my concertina. And, I can play the guitar.

A VOICE FROM THE CORNER. A silly speech from a silly fool.

FEDYA. I can hear another of them. [Pause.]

NAZAROVNA. [To SAVVA] If you'd only lie where it was warm now, old man, and warm your feet. [Pause.] Old man! Man of God! [Shakes SAVVA] Are you going to die?

FEDYA. You ought to drink a little vodka, grandfather. Drink, and it'll burn, burn in your stomach, and warm up your heart. Drink, do!

Hasta aqui llega la vista previa gratuita.

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