

The Bet

by
Anton Chekhov

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Anton Chekhov

Author's biography

Anton Pavlovitch Chekhov, the son of a grocer and one of a family of six, born at Taganrog in Southern Russia on January 17, 1860. Chekhov attended a school for Greek boys in his home town from 1867-68 and later he attended the local grammar school from 1868-1876 when his father went bankrupt and moved the family to Moscow. Chekhov, only sixteen at the time, decided to remain in his home-town and supported himself by tutorial as he continued his schooling for three more years.

After he finished grammar school Chekhov enrolled in the Moscow University Medical School. In 1884 he took his Medical degree at the University of Moscow. He never practiced regularly; his family was poor, and he had found that he could make money by writing. Chekhov's medical and science experience is evident in much of his work as evidenced by the apathy many of his characters show towards tragic events.

His first works were humorous stories, but about 1886 he turned to stricter subjects. In 1890 he made a journey to Sahalin across Siberia and back by sea. From that year he lived mainly in Russia, at Melihovo, a

small estate he had bought in the province of Moscow (1892-98); and later at Yalta in the Crimea (1898-1904), where he had to go on account of Pulmonary Consumption. In 1901 he married the actress Olga Knipper. His two chief plays ‘*Three Sisters*’ and ‘*The Cherry Orchard*’, were first published in 1901&1903. In 1904 he went abroad for a cure to Badenweiler in the Black Forest; he died there on July 2, 1904. His body was buried in Moscow.

Chekhov’s name rightly stands beside those of Leo Tolstoy and Fyodor Dostoyevsky. Chekhov hated tyranny, falsehood, the complacency of the “*strong*”⁶⁵ and the humility of the “*weak*”⁶⁶ and attacked vulgarity in all its forms. Most of all, he valued truth, human dignity and moral beauty. Between 1918 and 1985, books by Chekhov have been published in the Soviet Union 1.726 times in editions totalling 145 million 300 thousand copies in 92 languages spoken by the people of the USSR and other countries all over the world.

Anton Chekhov – Inclusive Humanism

In his own words:

*I only wanted to tell people honestly and frankly: Look at yourselves and see how badly and tediously you live. The main thing is that people should understand this, and when they do, they will surely make another and better life for themselves...It will be entirely different and not like the one they live at present.*⁶⁷

It is here that Anton Chekhov is the harbinger of total human development based on what one can describe as inclusive humanism. To understand the depth of his humanism the best tribute made by Maxim Gorky in his writings (Anton Chekhov, translated by Ivy Litvinov). The excerpts from Maxim Gorky's writings are the testimony of Chekhov's humanism:

He once invited me to visit him in the village of Kuchuk-Koi, where he had a tiny plot of land and a white two-storey house. He showed me over his "*estate*"⁶⁸, talking animatedly all the time. He broke off suddenly, coughed, cast an oblique glance at me, and smiled his sweet, gentle smile, a smile which had an irresistible charm, forcing one to follow his words with the keenest attention.

"Does it bore you to listen to my dreams? I love talking about this. If you only knew the absolute necessity for the Russian countryside of good, clever, educated teachers! In Russia we have simply got to create exceptional conditions for teachers, and that as soon as possible, since we realize that unless the people get an all-round education the state will collapse like a house built from insufficiently baked bricks. The teacher must be an actor, an artist, passionately in love with his work, and our teachers are navies, half-educated individuals, who go to the village to teach children about as willingly as they would go to exile. They are famished, down-trodden, they live in perpetual fear of losing their

livelihood. And the teacher ought to be the first man in the village, able to answer all questions put to him by the peasants, so that the peasants regard him as a power worthy of attention and respect, whom no one will dare to shout at... or humiliate, as in our country everybody does – the village policeman, the rich shopkeeper, the priest, the school patron, the elder and that official who, though he is called a school inspector, busies himself, not over the improvement of conditions for education, but simply and solely over carrying out district circulars to the letter. It's absurd to pay a niggardly pittance to one who is called upon to educate the people – to educate the people, mind! It is intolerable that such a one should go about in rags, shiver in a damp, dilapidated school, be poisoned by fumes from badly ventilated stoves, be always catching cold, and by the age of thirty be a mass of disease – laryngitis, rheumatism, tuberculosis. It's a disgrace to us! For nine or ten months in the year our teachers live in the lives of hermits, without a soul to speak to, they grow stupid from loneliness, without books or amusements. And if they venture to invite friends to come and see them, people think they are disaffected – that idiotic word with which cunning folk terrify fools... All this is disgusting ...a kind of mockery of human beings doing a great and terribly important work. I tell you, when I meet a teacher I feel quite awkward in front of him – for his timidity, and for his shabbiness. I feel as if I myself were somehow to blame for the teacher's wretched state – I do, really!”⁶⁹

Pausing for a moment, he threw out his arms and said softly: “What an absurd, clumsy country our Russia is!”⁷⁰

A shadow of profound sorrow darkened his eyes, and a fine network of wrinkles showed at the corners, deepening his glance. He looked around him and began making fun of himself.

This was often the way with him. One moment he would be talking with warmth, gravity and sincerity, and the next, he would be laughing at himself and his own words. And beneath this gentle, sorrowful laughter could be felt the subtle skepticism of a man who knew the value of words, the value of dreams. There was a shade of his attractive modesty, his intuitive delicacy in this laughter, too.

Sometimes I would find this “*teacher*” in his house – usually a teacher, flushed with the consciousness of his own awkwardness, sat on the edge of a chair, sweating and picking his words, trying to speak as smoothly and “*educated*” as he could, or, with the over familiarity of a morbidly shy individual, entirely absorbed in the desire not to appear stupid in the eyes of the writer, showered Anton Pavlovich with questions that had probably only just come into his head. Anton Pavlovich would listen attentively to the clumsy speech; and a smile would light up his mournful eyes, setting the wrinkles on his temples in play, and in his deep, gentle, hushed voice he would begin speaking, using simple, clear words, words close to life, which immediately put his visitor at ease, so that he stopped trying to be clever and, consequently, became both cleverer and more interesting...

It seems to me that in the presence of Anton Pavlovich everyone felt an unconscious desire to be simply, more truthful, more himself, and I had many opportunities of observing how people threw off their attire of grand bookish phrases, fashionable expressions, and all the rest of the cheap trifles with which Russians, in their anxiety to appear Europeans, adorn themselves, as savages deck themselves with shells and fishes' teeth. Anton Pavlovich was not fond of fishes' teeth and cock's feathers; all that is tawdry, tinkling alien, donned by human beings for the sake of an "*imposing appearance*"⁷¹ embarrassed him, and I noticed that whenever he met with one of these dressed-up individuals he felt an overmastering impulse to free him from his ponderous and superfluous trappings, distorting the true face and living soul of his interlocutor. All his life Anton Pavlovich lived the life of the soul, was always himself, inwardly free, and took no notice of what some expected, and others – less delicate – demanded of him. He did not like the conversations which Russians, in the simplicity of their hearts, find so amusing, forgetting that it is absurd and not in the least witty to talk about the velvet apparel of the future, while not even possessing in the present a decent pair of trousers.

He had the art of exposing vulgarity everywhere, an art which can only be mastered by one whose own demands on life are very high, and which springs from the ardent desire to see simplicity, beauty and harmony in man. He was a severe and merciless judge of vulgarity.

When one is young, vulgarity seems to be simply amusing and insignificant, but it gradually surrounds the individual, its grey mist

creeping into his brains and blood, like poison or charcoal fumes, till he becomes like an old tavern-sign, eaten up with rust – there seems to be something depicted on it, but what, it is impossible to make out.

From the very first Anton Pavlovich managed to reveal in the grey ocean of vulgarity its tragically sombre jokes. Only one has to read his “*humorous*”⁷² stories carefully, to realize how much that was cruel was seen and shamefacedly concealed by the author in comic narrative and situations.

He had an almost virginal modesty, he could never bring himself to challenge people loudly and openly: “*Be more decent – can’t you!*”⁷³ vainly trusting that they would themselves realize the urgent necessity for being more decent. Detesting all that was vulgar and unclean, he described the seamy side of life in the lofty language of the poet, with the gentle smile of the humorist, and the bitter inner reproach beneath the polished surface of his stories is scarcely noticeable.

The esteemed public, reading ‘*A Daughter of Albion*’, laughs, and is probable unable to see in this story the detestable sneers of the well-nourished squire at a forlorn individual, a stranger to everything and everyone. And throughout all Chekhov’s humorous stories I hear the gentle, profound sigh of a pure, truly human heart, a despairing sigh of pity for human beings unable to maintain their self-respect, and yielding without a struggle to brute force, living like slaves, believing in nothing

but the necessity for the cabbage soup they daily swallow to be as succulent as possible, feeling nothing but the fear of being beaten by the powerful and the insolent.

No one ever understood the tragic nature of life's trifles so clearly and intuitively as Chekhov did, never before has a writer been able to hold up to human beings such a ruthlessly truthful picture of all that was shameful and pitiable in the dingy chaos of middle-class life.

His enemy was vulgarity. All his life he fought against it, held it up to scorn, depicted it with a keen impartial pen, discovering the fungus of vulgarity even where, at first glance, everything seemed to be ordered for the best, the most convenient, and even brilliant. And vulgarity got back on him with an ugly trick when his dead body – the body of a poet – was sent to Moscow in an oyster wagon.

This dingy green wagon strikes me as the broad triumphant grin of vulgarity at its weary foe, and the innumerable "*reminiscences*" of the yellow press – mere hypocritical grief, behind which I seem to feel the cold, stinking breath of that very vulgarity which secretly rejoiced in the death of its enemy.

Reading the works of Chekhov makes one feel as if it were a sad day in late autumn, when the air is transparent, the bare trees stand out in bold relief against the sky, the houses are huddled together, and people are

dim and dreary. Everything is so strange, so lonely, motionless, and powerless. The remote distances are blue and void, merging with the pale sky breathing a dreary cold on the half-frozen mud. But the mind of the author, like the autumn sunshine, light up the well-trodden roads, the crooked streets, the dirty, cramped houses in which pitiful “*little*” people gasp out their lives in boredom and idleness, filling their dwellings with a meaningless, drowsy bustle. There goes “*the darling*”, as nervous as a little grey mouse, a sweet humble woman, who loves so indiscriminately and so slavishly. Strike her a blow on the cheek and she will not even dare, meek slave, to cry out. Beside her stands the melancholy *Olga* from ‘*The Three Sisters*’; she, too, is capable of loving and submits patiently to the whims of the depraved, vulgar wife of her fainéant brother; the lives of her sisters fall in ruins around her and she only cries, incapable of doing anything about it, while not a single living, strong word of protest against vulgarity is formed within her.

In a letter to A.S. Suvorin, Chekhov wrote: “*There is nothing drearier and more unpoetical than the prosaic struggle for existence, destroying the joy of life, and creating apathy*”⁷⁴.

From his earliest youth the “*struggle for existence*”⁷⁵ had to be waged in the joyless, colourless form of daily petty cares for a crust of bread – and a big crust was needed, for others as well as himself. To this cares, devoid of joy, he gave all his youthful energies, and the wonder is how he managed to preserve his sense of humour. He saw life as nothing but the weary striving for food and repose. Its great dramas and tragedies

were concealed from him by a thick layer of the commonplace. And it was only when he no longer had to worry so much about earning bread for others that he could cast a keen glance at the truth about these dramas.

Gorky has never met anyone who felt the importance of work as the basis of culture so profoundly and diversely as Chekhov. This feeling showed itself in all the trifles of his home life, in the selection of things for the home, in that love for things in themselves, and while quite untainted by the desire to collect, he never wearied of admiring them as the product of man's creative spirit. He loved building, planting gardens, adorning the earth, he felt the poetry of work. With what touching care he watched the growth of the fruit-trees and shrubs he had himself planted. In the midst of the innumerable cares connected with the building of his house at Autka, he said: "*If everyone in the world did all he was capable of on his own plot of land, what a beautiful world it would be!*"⁷⁶

His disease sometimes called into being a hypochondriac, or even a misanthropical, mood. At such times he would be extremely critical, and very hard to get on with.

One day, lying on the sofa, giving dry coughs, and playing with the thermometer, he said: "*To live simply to die is by no means amusing, but to live with the knowledge that will die before your time, that really is idiotic...*"⁷⁷

Another time, seated at the open window and gazing out into the distance, at the sea, he suddenly said peevishly:

*We are accustomed to live in hopes of good weather, a good harvest, a nice love-affair, hopes of becoming rich or getting the offices of chief of police, but I've never noticed anyone hoping to get wiser. We say to ourselves: it'll be better under a new tsar, and in two hundred years it'll be still better, and nobody tries to make this good time come tomorrow. On the whole, life gets more and more complex every day and moves on at its own sweet will, and people get more and more stupid, and get isolated from life in ever-increasing numbers.*⁷⁸

After a pause he added, wrinkling up his forehead: *“Like crippled beggars in a religious procession”*.⁷⁹

He was a doctor, and the illness of a doctor is always worse than the illness of his patients. The patients only feel, but the doctor, as well as feeling, has a pretty good idea of the destructive effect of the disease on his constitution. This is a case in which knowledge brings death nearer.

Much could be written of Chekhov, but this would require close, precise narration, and that is what I'm no good at. He should be written

about as he himself wrote '*The Steppe*', a fragrant, open-air, very Russian story, pensive and wistful. A story of one's self.

It does one good to remember a man like that, it is like a sudden visitation of cheerfulness, and it gives a clear meaning to life again.

Man is the axis of the Universe.

And his vices, you ask, his shortcomings?

We all hunger for the love of our fellow creatures, and when one is hungry, even a half-baked loaf tastes sweet.

The Bet: Plot Summary

In '*The Bet*', by Anton Chekhov, extensive uses of conflict paired with detailed description of characters' emotions are essential in the delivery of a powerful theme. Chekhov's use of man versus man is important in setting up the main theme throughout the story. The first conflict gives the reader an inside expository idea of the basis of the story. Man versus man, in this case, the lawyer versus the banker, is the introductory conflict, which is resolved at the end of the story. The story begins with a heated debate on capital punishment versus life imprisonment. "*It's is a lie, I bet you two millions you wouldn't stick in a cell for five years. If you mean it seriously I bet I'll stay not five but fifteen years*"⁸⁰. The banker and the lawyer enter to a bet agreement as a result of their unresolved conflict in the debate on capital punishment versus life imprisonment.

The story portrays the then lifestyle of the people of middle class society, the value system and the lust, envy, jealousy and the brutal mental make up of the people acquired money by the evil means and the desire to remain popular in the society. The lawyer emerged as a transformed soul from materialism to God realization and proved to the world that awakening of inner being is the supreme essence of life.

'The Bet': Critical Appreciation

The young lawyer, when he was asked his opinion about the heated debate on capital punishment versus life imprisonment, he said:

*The death sentence and the life sentence are equally immoral, but if I had to choose between the death penalty and the imprisonment for life, I would certainly choose the second. To live anyhow is better than not at all.*⁸¹

And he accepts the life imprisonment for fifteen years. The lawyer who in the beginning of the story submitted himself to torture for money, comes to resent and refuse the banker's money in the end.

It is a happy ending where both individuals overcome their conflicts and reach happiness. By Chekhov's use of conflict and immerse struggle among the characters, he, in a variety of ways effectively relays

his themes in a way that relates with the reader through the characters. 'The Bet' parallels with the enlightenment based ideas of spiritual freedom and the pursuit of happiness. The lawyer, after years of confinement, not only resents money, but also the world and its views on finances. The imprisonment, the conflicts of the lawyer is the main focus in the story. Another conflict Chekhov uses to further relay his theme is man versus himself, which allows the reader to identify and relate with the characters throughout the story. The only escape from bankruptcy and disgrace-is that the man should die. The banker also struggles with his environment. While the banker is looking to resolve his debt by murder, the lawyer is eventually saved by the lawyer's disgust for financial worldliness. Fifteen years before he had too many millions to count but now he was afraid to ask himself what he had more of money or debts. During the first year of imprisonment, the lawyer as far as it was possible to judge from his short notes, suffered terribly from loneliness and boredom. The Banker feels shame for the thought of what he was going to do not even after his terrible loses on the exchange, had he felt such contempt for himself now. "*I waive the two millions of which I once dreamed of as paradise, and which I now despise*"⁸². The banker's obsession for money proves to be the cause of his failure as he slowly loses everything he has to the stock exchange, and bad business virtues.

Through analyzing this excerpt from the story of 'The Bet' by Anton Chekhov, one can sense the imprisoned lawyer criticizing the banker of being ignorant and insane. What exactly does it mean to be insane or ignorant? By definition, for one to be classified as insane, they would have the inability to mediate with reality at will. The definition of

ignorance can be grasped by analyzing Plato's concept of Simile of the Cave. Ignorance is depicted as the lowest level or form of knowledge one can obtain. If one would want to deepen their understanding of *The Bet*, Simile of the Cave would smoothly coincide and explain the concepts of ignorance and insanity present in this story. Before comparing the two stories, we must comprehend Simile of the Cave. The journey of the prisoner from ignorance to the truth, holds deep and significant meanings. Recalling from the story, the prisoner is forced from the realm of ignorance to guesswork, *zoa*, *mathematica*, and finally to *archai*. As the journey through the cave to the outside world is analyzed, one can evidently see the prisoner rise above ignorance by trying to seek the truth (in the world of *archai*). Knowing that the prisoner learned many truths, it is valid to say that he is becoming wiser. By the time the emancipated prisoner reaches and becomes content in the world of *archai* (truth), the guards struggle to take him back to the benches in the world of guesswork. When the prisoner is seated back in guesswork, he explains of his findings to the other prisoners that remained on the benches during his voyage. We find that after he explains of his new findings and theories, he is classified as insane by the rest of the prisoners. The other prisoners do not believe him, due to that they have not experienced it for themselves. The question of who the real insane and ignorant man is now remains. Through the eyes of the prisoner-philosopher, it is the other prisoners that are insane and ignorant. Why? It is because the prisoners are taking falsehood for truth. They fail to believe that there is actually more to the world besides mere shadows upon a cave wall. Yet, the other prisoners probably classified the prisoner-philosopher as insane, due to his jabber of concepts that they have never heard of within their lifetime on the bench.

Clearly, ignorance and insanity play a critical part of the voyage through the cave. The voyage of the young lawyer versus the journey of the prisoner-philosopher are very similar. Within the first year of the lawyer's imprisonment he does not accept any fine wines or tobacco, and finds entertainment by playing the piano. During the times he does not play the piano, the guards would bring him books to read. At first he was sent novels of comedy, mystery, romance, and fantasy. By the end of the 4 year, he does not play the piano, yet he decides to start reading classics. Just as the prisoner repeatedly named shadows on the wall, the lawyer frequently read of fictional books with the same plot. The repetitive plots may be due to the selection of the guards. Therefore, these guards are similar to the parade of men that force the prisoners to see the same shadows constantly. Yet, with the amount of books that the lawyer read, the plots were bound to be repetitive. After examining the lawyer's status, we can figuratively say that the lawyer is still chained to the bench in the realm of guesswork. By the turn of the lawyer's fifth year, the lawyer has gone through a dramatic change. It is through the truth test of correspondence that makes the lawyer not want to read any more books. The lawyer is bored of reading novels and classics because the plots of each book became predictable. At this point the lawyer is found constantly crying, arguing and destroying letters that he wrote. There are many explanations to the lawyer's frustration. A few reasons is that the original length of time the bet was suppose to last was five years and not fifteen. Plus the bet was senseless since he could only try the alternative punishment and live to talk about it afterwards.

Chekhov -A Different Alchemist

In Russia the writers had been writing for a couple of generations stories of quite another order; and when the fact forced itself upon the attention both of readers and of authors that the kind of story that had so long found favour was grown tediously mechanical, it was discovered that in that country there was a body of writers who had made of the short story something new. It is singular that it took so long for this variety of the brief narrative to reach the Western World. It is true that the stories of Turgenev were read in French translations. He was accepted by the Goncourts, Flaubert and the intellectual circles in which they moved for his stately presence, his ample means and his aristocratic origins; and his works were appreciated with the modified rapture with which the French have always regarded the productions of foreign authors. Their attitude has been like that of Dr. Johnson with regard to a woman's preaching, "*It is not done well, but you are surprised to find it done at all*"⁸³. It was not till Melchior de Vogüé published his book '*Le Roman Russe*' in 1886 that Russian literature had any effect on the literary world of Paris. In due course, about 1905, a number of Chekhov's stories were translated into French and were on the whole favourably received. He remained little known in England. When he died, in 1904, he was regarded by the Russians as the foremost writer of his generation: the '*Encyclopedia Britanica*' in the eleventh edition, published in 1911, had no more to say of him than, "*But A. Chekhov showed considerable power in his short stories*"⁸⁴. Cold praise. It was not till Mrs. Garnett brought out in thirteen little volumes a selection from his enormous output that English readers took an interest in him. Since then the prestige of Russian writers in

general, and of Chekhov in particular, has been enormous. It has to a large extent transformed the composition and the appreciation of short stories. Critical readers turn away with indifference from the story which is technically known as 'well made', and the writers who produce it still, for the delectation of the great mass of the public, are little considered.

Chekhov took Maupassant as his model. If he had not told us that himself it couldn't be believed, for their aims and methods seem to me entirely different. In general, Maupassant sought to make his stories dramatic and in order to do this, he was prepared if necessary to sacrifice probability. Chekhov deliberately eschewed the dramatic. He dealt with ordinary people leading ordinary lives: "*People don't go to the North Pole to fall off icebergs*"⁸⁵, he wrote in one of his letters. "*They go to offices, quarrel with their wives and eat cabbage soup*"⁸⁶. One may fairly object to this that people do go to the North Pole, and if they don't fall off icebergs they undergo adventures as perilous and there is no reason in the world why an author shouldn't write very good stories about them. Obviously it is not enough that people should go to their offices and eat cabbage soup, and that Chekhov ever thought it was: in order to make a story, surely they must steal the petty cash at the office or accept bribes, beat or deceive their wives, and when they eat cabbage soup it must be with significance. It then becomes a symbol of a happy domestic life or of the anguish of a frustrated one.

Chekhov's medical practice, desultory though it was, brought him into contact with all manner of persons, the peasants and the factory

workers, the owners of factories, the merchants and the more or less minor officials who played a devastating part in the lives of the people, the landowners who by the liberation of the serfs were reduced to penury. He does not seem ever to have been in touch with the aristocracy, except only one story, the bitter story called '*The Princess*', in which he was concerned with it. He wrote with ruthless candour of the fecklessness of the landowners who let their properties go to rack and ruin; of the wretched lot of the factory workers who lived on the verge of starvation, toiling twelve hours a day so that their employers might add estate to estate; of the vulgarity and greed of the merchant class; of the filth, drunkenness, brutality, ignorance, laziness of the ill paid, ever hungry peasants and the stinking, verminous hovels in which they lived.

Chekhov could give an extraordinary reality to the events he described. You accept what is told you as you would the account of an event described by a trustworthy reporter. But, of course, Chekhov was not merely a reporter; he observed, selected, guessed and combined. As Koteliansky has put it, "*In his wonderful objectivity, standing above personal sorrows and joys, Chekhov knew and saw everything. He could be kind and generous without loving; tender and sympathetic without attachment, a benefactor without expecting gratitude*".⁸⁷

But this impassivity of Chekhov's was an outrage to many of his fellow writers and he was savagely attacked. The charge against him was his apparent indifference to the events and social conditions of the time. The demand of the intelligentsia was that a Russian writer was under an

obligation to deal with them. Chekhov's reply was that the author's business was to narrate the facts and leave it to his readers to decide what should be done about them. He insisted that the artists should not be called upon to solve narrowly specialized problems. "*For special problems*", he said, "*we have specialists; it is their business to judge the community, the fate of capitalism, the evil of drunkenness...*"⁸⁸. Some reviewer began his article on a work of fiction recently published with the words, "*Mr. So and So is not a mere story teller*"⁸⁹. This particular reviewer is himself a well-known novelist. But from this remark of his it could be conclude that in his opinion a novelist should be something more than a novelist. It is obvious that, though perhaps with some misgiving, he accepts the notion, prevalent among many writers today, that in the troubled state of the world we live in it is frivolous for an author to write novels designed only to enable the reader to pass a few pleasant hours. Such works are, as we know, disparagingly dismissed as escapist. That, like 'potboiler', is a word that might well be discarded from the critic's vocabulary. All art is escapist, Mozart's symphonies as well as Constable's landscapes; and do we read Shakespeare's sonnets or the odes of Keats for anything but the delight they give us? Why should we ask more from the novelist than we ask of the poet, the composer, the painter? In point of fact there is no such thing as a '*mere*' story. When he writes a story, the author, sometimes without any more intention than to make it readable, willy-nilly offers a criticism of life. When Rudyard Kipling in his '*Plain Tales of the Hills*' wrote of the Indian civilians, the polo-playing officers and their wives, he wrote with the naïve admiration of a young journalist of modest extraction dazzled by what he took for glamour. It is amazing that no one at the time saw what a damning

indictment of the Paramount Power these stories were. You cannot read them now without realizing how inevitable it was that the British sooner or later would be forced to surrender their hold on India. So is with Chekhov. Objective as tried to be, intent only on describing life with truth, you cannot read his stories without its being borne in upon you that the brutality and ignorance he wrote of, the corruption, the miserable poverty of the poor and the insouciance of the rich, must inevitably result in a bloody revolution.

Authors lead obscure lives. They are not bidden to the Lord Mayor's Banquet. The freedom of great cities is not conferred upon them. Not for them is the honour of breaking a bottle of champagne against the hull of an ocean-going liner soon to set out on her maiden voyage. Crowds do not assemble, as they do with film stars, to see them emerge from their hotel to leap into a Rolls-Royce. They are not invited to open bazaars in aid of distressed gentlewomen, nor, in the presence of a cheering crowd, to hand a silver cup to the winner of the singles at Wimbledon. But they have their compensations. From prehistoric times men blessed with a creative gift have arisen who have by artistic production added adornment to the grim business of living. As anyone can see for himself by going to Crete, cups, bowls, pitchers have been decorated with patterns – not because it made them more serviceable, but because it made them more pleasing to the eye. Throughout the ages artists have found their complete satisfaction in producing works of art. If the writer of fiction can do that, he has done all that can reasonably be asked of him. It is an abuse to use the novel as a pulpit or a platform.

Anton Chekhov – Points of View by Somerset Maugham

Alexander Kuprin in his reminiscences of Chekhov wrote as follows, *“I think he did not open or give his heart completely to anyone. But he regarded everybody kindly, indifferently so far as friendship is concerned – and at the same time with a great, perhaps unconscious interest”*. This is strangely revealing.

Chekhov’s early stories were for the most part humorous. He wrote them very easily; he wrote, he said, as a bird sings, and attached no importance to them. It was not till after his first visit to Petersburg, when he discovered that he was accepted as a promising and talented author that he began to take himself seriously. He set himself then to acquire proficiency in his craft. One day a friend found him copying a story of Tolstoy’s and when asked what he was doing, he replied, *“I’m re-writing it”*. His friend was shocked that he should take such a liberty with the master’s work, whereupon Chekhov explained that he was doing it as an exercise; he had conceived the idea that by doing this he could learn the methods of the writers he admired and so evolve a manner of his own. It is evident that his labour was not wasted. He learnt to compose his stories with consummate skill: ‘The Bet’ is an example of elegant construction:

“Your books have given me wisdom. All that the unresting thought of man has created in the ages is compressed into a small compass in my brain. I know that I am wiser than all of you.

“And I despise your books, I despise wisdom and the blessings of this world. It is all worthless, fleeting, illusory and deceptive, like a mirage. You may be proud, wise, and fine, but death will wipe you off the face of the earth as though you were no more than mice burrowing under the floor, and your posterity, your history, your immortal geniuses will burn or freeze together with the earthly globe.

“You have lost your reason and taken the wrong path. You have taken lies for truth, and hideousness for beauty. You would marvel if, owing to strange events of some sorts, frogs and lizards suddenly grew on apple and orange trees instead of fruit, or if roses began to smell like a sweating horse; so I marvel at you who exchange heaven for earth. I don’t want to understand you.

“To prove to you in action how I despise all that you live by, I renounce the two million of which I once dreamed as of paradise and which now I despise. To deprive myself of the right to the money I shall go out from here five hours before the time fixed, and so break the compact....”

When the banker had read this he laid the page on the table, kissed the strange man on the head, and went out of the lodge, weeping. At no other time, even when he had lost heavily on the Stock Exchange, had he felt so great a contempt for himself. When he got home he lay on his bed, but his tears and emotion kept him for hours from sleeping.

Next morning the watchman ran in with pale faces, and told him they had seen the man who lived in the lodge climb out of the window

into the garden, go to the gate, and disappear. The banker went at once with the servants to the lodge and made sure of the flight of his prisoner. To avoid arousing unnecessary talk, he took from the table the writing in which the millions were renounced, and when he got home locked it up in the fireproof safe.