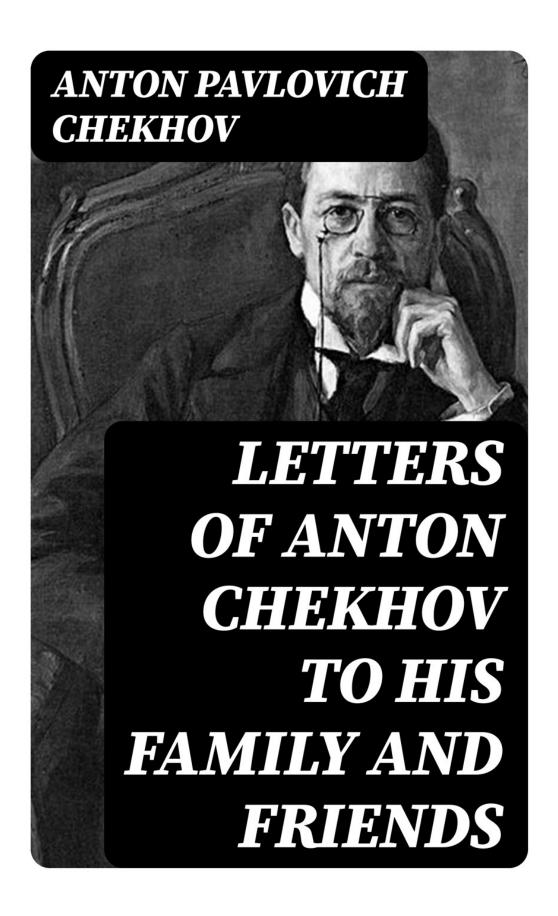


FRIENDS



Anton Pavlovich Chekhov

Letters of Anton Chekhov to His Family and Friends

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TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

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Of the eighteen hundred and ninety letters published by Chekhov's family I have chosen for translation these letters and passages from letters which best to illustrate Chekhov's life, character and opinions. The brief memoir is abridged and adapted from the biographical sketch by his brother Mihail. Chekhov's letters to his wife after his marriage have not as yet been published.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

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In 1841 a serf belonging to a Russian nobleman purchased his freedom and the freedom of his family for 3,500 roubles, being at the rate of 700 roubles a soul, with one daughter, Alexandra, thrown in for nothing. The grandson of this serf was Anton Chekhov, the author; the son of the nobleman was Tchertkov, the Tolstoyan and friend of Tolstoy.

There is in this nothing striking to a Russian, but to the English student it is sufficiently significant for several reasons. It illustrates how recent a growth was the educated middle-class in pre-revolutionary Russia, and it shows, what is perhaps more significant, the homogeneity of the Russian people, and their capacity for completely changing their whole way of life.

Chekhov's father started life as a slave, but the son of this slave was even more sensitive to the Arts, more innately civilized and in love with the things of the mind than the son of the slaveowner. Chekhov's father, Pavel Yegorovitch, had a passion for music and singing; while he was still a serf boy he learned to read music at sight and to play the violin. A few years after his freedom had been purchased he settled at Taganrog, a town on the Sea of Azov, where he afterwards opened a "Colonial Stores."

This business did well until the construction of the railway to Vladikavkaz, which greatly diminished the importance of Taganrog as a port and a trading centre. But Pavel Yegorovitch was always inclined to neglect his business. He took an active part in all the affairs of the town, devoted himself to church singing, conducted the choir, played on the violin, and painted ikons.

In 1854 he married Yevgenia Yakovlevna Morozov, the daughter of a cloth merchant of fairly good education who had settled down at Taganrog after a life spent in travelling about Russia in the course of his business.

There were six children, five of whom were boys, Anton being the third son. The family was an ordinary patriarchal household of the kind common at that time. The father was severe, and in exceptional cases even went so far as to chastise his children, but they all lived on warm and

affectionate terms. Everyone got up early, the boys went to the high school, and when they returned learned their lessons. All of them had their hobbies. The eldest, Alexandr, would construct an electric battery, Nikolay used to draw, Ivan to bind books, while Anton was always writing stories. In the evening, when their father came home from the shop, there was choral singing or a duet.

Pavel Yegorovitch trained his children into a regular choir, taught them to sing music at sight, and play on the violin, while at one time they had a music teacher for the piano too. There was also a French governess who came to teach the children languages. Every Saturday the whole family went to the evening service, and on their return sang hymns and burned incense. On Sunday morning they went to early mass, after which they all sang hymns in chorus at home. Anton had to learn the whole church service by heart and sing it over with his brothers.

The chief characteristic distinguishing the Chekhov family from their neighbours was their habit of singing and having religious services at home.

Though the boys had often to take their father's place in the shop, they had leisure enough to enjoy themselves. They sometimes went for whole days to the sea fishing, played Russian tennis, and went for excursions to their grandfather's in the country. Anton was a sturdy, lively boy, extremely intelligent, and inexhaustible in jokes and enterprises of all kinds. He used to get up lectures and performances, and was always acting and mimicking. As children, the brothers got up a performance of Gogol's "Inspector General," in which Anton took the part of

Gorodnitchy. One of Anton's favourite improvisations was a scene in which the Governor of the town attended church parade at a festival and stood in the centre of the church, on a rug surrounded by foreign consuls. Anton, dressed in his high-school uniform, with his grandfather's old sabre coming to his shoulder, used to act the part of the Governor with extraordinary subtlety and carry out a review of imaginary Cossacks. Often the children would gather round their mother or their old nurse to hear stories.

Chekhov's story "Happiness" was written under the influence of one of his nurse's tales, which were always of the mysterious, of the extraordinary, of the terrible, and poetical.

Their mother, on the other hand, told the children stories of real life, describing how she had travelled all over Russia as a little girl, how the Allies had bombarded Taganrog during the Crimean War, and how hard life had been for the peasants in the days of serfdom. She instilled into her children a hatred of brutality and a feeling of regard for all who were in an inferior position, and for birds and animals.

Chekhov in later years used to say: "Our talents we got from our father, but our soul from our mother."

In 1875 the two elder boys went to Moscow.

After their departure the business went from bad to worse, and the family sank into poverty.

In 1876 Pavel Yegorovitch closed his shop, and went to join his sons in Moscow. While earning their own living, one was a student at the University, and the other a student at the School of Sculpture and Painting. The house was sold by auction, one of the creditors took all the furniture, and

Chekhov's mother was left with nothing. Some months afterwards she went to rejoin her husband in Moscow, taking the younger children with her, while Anton, who was then sixteen, lived on in solitude at Taganrog for three whole years, earning his own living, and paying for his education at the high school.

He lived in the house that had been his father's, in the family of one Selivanov, the creditor who had bought it, and gave lessons to the latter's nephew, a Cossack. He went with his pupil to the latter's house in the country, and learned to ride and shoot. During the last two years he was very fond of the society of the high-school girls, and used to tell his brothers that he had had the most delightful flirtations.

At the same time he went frequently to the theatre and was very fond of French melodramas, so that he was by no means crushed by his early struggle for existence. In 1879 he went to Moscow to enter the University, bringing with him two school-fellows who boarded with his family. He found his father had just succeeded in getting work away from home, so that from the first day of his arrival he found himself head of the family, every member of which had to work for their common livelihood. Even little Mihail used to copy out lectures for students, and so made a little money. It was the absolute necessity of earning money to pay for his fees at the University and to help in supporting the household that forced Anton to write. That winter he wrote his first published story, "A Letter to a Learned Neighbour." All the members of the family were closely bound together

round one common centre—Anton. "What will Anton say?" was always their uppermost thought on every occasion.

Ivan soon became the master of the parish school at Voskresensk, a little town in the Moscow province. Living was cheap there, so the other members of the family spent the summer there; they were joined by Anton when he had taken his degree, and the Chekhovs soon had a large circle of friends in the neighbourhood. Every day the company met, went long walks, played croquet, discussed politics, read aloud, and went into raptures over Shtchedrin. Here Chekhov gained an insight into military society which he afterwards turned to account in his play "The Three Sisters."

One day a young doctor called Uspensky came in from Zvenigorod, a small town fourteen miles away. "Look here," he said to Chekhov, "I am going away for a holiday and can't find anyone to take my place.... You take the job on. My Pelageya will cook for you, and there is a guitar there...."

Voskresensk and Zvenigorod played an important part in Chekhov's life as a writer; a whole series of his tales is founded on his experiences there, besides which it was his first introduction to the society of literary and artistic people. Three or four miles from Voskresensk was the estate of a landowner, A. S. Kiselyov, whose wife was the daughter of Begitchev, the director of the Moscow Imperial Theatre. The Chekhovs made the acquaintance of the Kiselyovs, and spent three summers in succession on their estate, Babkino.

The Kiselyovs were musical and cultivated people, and intimate friends of Dargomyzhsky, Tchaykovsky the composer, and the Italian actor Salvini. Madame Kiselyov was passionately fond of fishing, and would spend hours at

a time sitting on the river bank with Anton, fishing and talking about literature. She was herself a writer. Chekhov was always playing with the Kiselyov children and running about the old park with them. The people he met, the huntsman, the gardener, the carpenters, the sick women who came to him for treatment, and the place itself, river, forests, nightingales—all provided Chekhov with subjects to write about and put him in the mood for writing. He always got up early and began writing by seven o'clock in the morning. After lunch the whole party set off to look for mushrooms in the woods. Anton was fond of looking for mushrooms, and said it stimulated the imagination. At this time he was always talking nonsense.

Levitan, the painter, lived in the neighbourhood, and Chekhov and he dressed up, blacked their faces and put on turbans. Levitan then rode off on a donkey through the fields, where Anton suddenly sprang out of the bushes with a gun and began firing blank cartridges at him.

In 1886 Chekhov suffered for the second time from an attack of spitting blood. There is no doubt that consumption was developing, but apparently he refused to believe this himself. He went on being as gay as ever, though he slept badly and often had terrible dreams. It was one of these dreams that suggested the subject of his story "The Black Monk."

That year he began to write for the *Novoye Vremya*, which made a special feature of his work. Under the influence of letters from Grigorovitch, who was the first person to appreciate his talent, Chekhov began to take his writing more seriously.

In 1887 he visited the south of Russia and stayed at the Holy Mountains, which gave him the subjects of two of his stories, "Easter Eve" and "Uprooted." In the autumn of that year he was asked by Korsh, a theatrical manager who knew him as a humorous writer, to write something for his theatre. Chekhov sat down and wrote "Ivanov" in a fortnight, sending off every act for rehearsal as it was completed.

By this time he had won a certain amount of recognition, everyone was talking of him, and there was consequently great curiosity about his new play. The performance was, however, only partially a success; the audience, divided into two parties, hissed vigorously and clapped noisily. For a long time afterwards the newspapers were full of discussions of the character and personality of the hero, while the novelty of the dramatic method attracted great attention.

In January, 1889, the play was performed at the Alexandrinsky Theatre in Petersburg and the controversy broke out again.

"Ivanov" was the turning-point in Chekhov's mental development, and literary career. He took up his position definitely as a writer, though his brass plate continued to hang on the door. Shortly after writing "Ivanov," he wrote a one-act play called "The Bear." The following season Solovtsev, who had taken the chief character in "The Bear," opened a theatre of his own in Moscow, which was not at first a success. He appealed to Chekhov to save him with a play for Christmas, which was only ten days off. Chekhov set to work and wrote an act every day. The play was produced in time, but the author was never satisfied with it, and after

a short, very successful run took it off the stage. Several years later he completely remodelled it and produced it as "Uncle Vanya" at the Art Theatre in Moscow. At this time he was writing a long novel, of which he often dreamed aloud, and which he liked to talk about. He was for several years writing at this novel, but no doubt finally destroyed it, as no trace of it could be found after his death. He wanted it to embody his views on life, opinions which he expressed in a letter to Plestcheyev in these words:

"I am not a Liberal, not a Conservative.... I should have liked to have been a free artist and nothing more—and I regret that God has not given me the strength to be one. I hate lying and violence in all their forms—the most absolute freedom, freedom from force and fraud in whatever form the two latter may be expressed, that is the programme I would hold to if I were a great artist."

At this time he was always gay and insisted on having people round him while he worked. His little house in Moscow, which "looked like a chest of drawers," was a centre to which people, and especially young people, flocked in swarms. Upstairs they played the piano, a hired one, while downstairs he sat writing through it all. "I positively can't live without visitors," he wrote to Suvorin; "when I am alone, for some reason I am frightened." This gay life which seemed so full of promise was, however, interrupted by violent fits of coughing. He tried to persuade other people, and perhaps himself, that it was not serious, and he would not consent to be properly examined. He was sometimes so weak from haemorrhage that he could see no one, but as soon as the attack was over his mood changed,

the doors were thrown open, visitors arrived, there was music again, and Chekhov was once more in the wildest spirits.

The summers of those two years, 1888 and 1889, he spent with his family in a summer villa at Luka, in the province of Harkov. He was in ecstasies beforehand over the deep, broad river, full of fish and crayfish, the pond full of carp, the woods, the old garden, and the abundance of young ladies. His expectations were fulfilled in every particular, and he had all the fishing and musical society he could wish for. Soon after his arrival Plestcheyev came to stay with him on a month's visit.

He was an old man in feeble health, but attractive to everyone. Young ladies in particular were immediately fascinated by him. He used to compose his works aloud, sometimes shouting at the top of his voice, so that Chekhov would run in and ask him if he wanted anything. Then the old man would give a sweet and guilty smile and go on with his work. Chekhov was in constant anxiety about the old man's health, as he was very fond of cakes and pastry, and Chekhov's mother used to regale him on them to such an extent that Anton was constantly having to give him medicine. Afterwards Suvorin, the editor of *Novoye Vremya*, came to stay. Chekhov and he used to paddle in a canoe, hollowed out of a tree, to an old mill, where they would spend hours fishing and talking about literature.

Both the grandsons of serfs, both cultivated and talented men, they were greatly attracted by each other. Their friendship lasted for several years, and on account of Suvorin's reactionary opinions, exposed Chekhov to a great deal of criticism in Russia. Chekhov's feelings for Suvorin began to change at the time of the Dreyfus case, but he never broke entirely with him. Suvorin's feelings for Chekhov remained unchanged.

In the spring of 1889 his brother Nikolay, the artist, fell ill with consumption, and his illness occupied Anton entirely, and completely prevented his working. That summer Nikolay died, and it was under the influence of this, his first great sorrow, that Chekhov wrote "A Dreary Story." For several months after the death of his brother he was extremely restless and depressed.

In 1890 his younger brother Mihail was taking his degree in law at Moscow, and studying treatises on the management of prisons. Chekhov got hold of them, became intensely interested in prisons, and resolved to visit the penal settlement of Sahalin. He made up his mind to go to the Far East so unexpectedly that it was difficult for his family to believe that he was in earnest.

He was afraid that after Kennan's revelations about the penal system in Siberia, he would, as a writer, be refused permission to visit the prisons in Sahalin, and therefore tried to get a free pass from the head of the prison administration, Galkin-Vrasskoy. When this proved fruitless he set off in April, 1890, with no credentials but his card as a newspaper correspondent.

The Siberian railway did not then exist, and only after great hardships, being held up by floods and by the impassable state of the roads, Chekhov succeeded in reaching Sahalin on the 11th of July, having driven nearly 3,000 miles. He stayed three months on the island,

traversed it from north to south, made a census of the population, talked to every one of the ten thousand convicts, and made a careful study of the convict system. Apparently the chief reason for all this was the consciousness that "We have destroyed millions of men in prisons.... It is not the superintendents of the prisons who are to blame, but all of us." In Russia it was not possible to be a "free artist and nothing more."

Chekhov left Sahalin in October and returned to Europe by way of India and the Suez Canal. He wanted to visit Japan, but the steamer was not allowed to put in at the port on account of cholera.

In the Indian Ocean he used to bathe by diving off the forecastle deck when the steamer was going at full speed, and catching a rope which was let down from the stern. Once while he was doing this he saw a shark and a shoal of pilot fish close to him in the water, as he describes in his story "Gusev."

The fruits of this journey were a series of articles in *Russkaya Myssl* on the island of Sahalin, and two short stories, "Gusev" and "In Exile." His articles on Sahalin were looked on with a favourable eye in Petersburg, and, who knows, it is possible that the reforms which followed in regard to penal servitude and exile would not have taken place but for their influence.

After about a month in Moscow, Chekhov went to Petersburg to see Suvorin. The majority of his Petersburg friends and admirers met him with feelings of envy and illwill. People gave dinners in his honour and praised him to the skies, but at the same time they were ready to "tear him to pieces." Even in Moscow such people did not give him a moment for work or rest. He was so prostrated by the feeling of hostility surrounding him that he accepted an invitation from Suvorin to go abroad with him. When Chekhov had completed arrangements for equipping the Sahalin schools with the necessary books, they set off for the South of Europe. Vienna delighted him, and Venice surpassed all his expectations and threw him into a state of childlike ecstasy.

Everything fascinated him—and then there was a change in the weather and a steady downpour of rain. Chekhov's spirits drooped. Venice was damp and seemed horrible, and he longed to escape from it.

He had had just such a change of mood in Singapore, which interested him immensely and suddenly filled him with such misery that he wanted to cry.

After Venice Chekhov did not get the pleasure he expected from any Italian town. Florence did not attract him; the sun was not shining. Rome gave him the impression of a provincial town. He was feeling exhausted, and to add to his depression he had got into debt, and had the prospect of spending the summer without any money at all.

Travelling with Suvorin, who did not stint himself, drew him into spending more than he intended, and he owed Suvorin a sum which was further increased at Monte Carlo by Chekhov's losing nine hundred roubles at roulette. But this loss was a blessing to him in so far as, for some reason, it made him feel satisfied with himself. At the end of April, 1891, after a stay in Paris, Chekhov returned to Moscow.

Except at Vienna and for the first days in Venice and at Nice, it had rained the whole time. On his return he had to work extremely hard to pay for his two tours. His brother Mihail was at this time inspector of taxes at Alexino, and Chekhov and his household spent the summer not far from that town in the province of Kaluga, so as to be near him. They took a house dating from the days of Catherine. Chekhov's mother had to sit down and rest halfway when she crossed the hall, the rooms were so large. He liked the place with its endless avenues of lime-trees and poetical river, while fishing and gathering mushrooms soothed him and put him in the mood for work. Here he went on with his story "The Duel," which he had begun before going abroad. From the windows there was the view of an old house which Chekhov described in "An Artist's Story," and which he was very eager to buy. Indeed from this time he began thinking of buying a country place of his own, not in Little Russia, but in Central Russia. Petersburg seemed to him more and more idle, cold and egoistic, and he had lost all faith in his Petersburg acquaintances. On the other hand, Moscow no longer seemed to him as before "like a cook," and he grew to love it. He grew fond of its climate, its people and its bells. He always delighted in bells. Sometimes in earlier days he had gathered together a party of friends and gone with them to Kamenny Bridge to listen to the Easter bells. After eagerly listening to them he would set off to wander from church to church, and with his legs giving way under him from fatigue would, only when Easter night was over, make his way homewards. Meanwhile his father, who was fond of staying till the end of the service, would return from the parish church, and all the brothers would sing "Christ is risen" in chorus, and then they all sat down to break their fast. Chekhov never spent an Easter night in bed.

Meanwhile in the spring of 1892 there began to be fears about the crops. These apprehensions were soon confirmed. An unfortunate summer was followed by a hard autumn and winter, in which many districts were famine-stricken. Side by side with the Government relief of the starving population there was a widespread movement for organizing relief, in which various societies and private persons took part. Chekhov naturally was drawn into this movement. The provinces of Nizhni-Novogorod and Voronezh were in the greatest distress, and in the former of these two provinces, Yegorov, an old friend of Chekhov's Voskresensk days, was a district captain (Zemsky Natchalnik). Chekhov wrote to subscription а fund Yegorov, aot gu amond acquaintance, and finally set off himself for Nizhni-Novogorod. As the starving peasants were selling their horses and cattle for next to nothing, or even slaughtering them for food, it was feared that as spring came on there would be no beasts to plough with, so that the coming year threatened to be one of famine also.

Chekhov organized a scheme for buying up the horses and feeding them till the spring at the expense of a relief fund, and then, as soon as field labour was possible, distributing them among the peasants who were without horses.

After visiting the province of Nizhni-Novogorod, Chekhov went with Suvorin to Voronezh. But this expedition was not a successful one. He was revolted by the ceremonious dinners