



Letters of Anton Chekhov to His Family and Friends

Anton Pavlovich Chekhov

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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.

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