

# ONE KIND OF REALIST

THE BISHOP and Other Stories. By Anton Chekhov.  
12mo. 302 pages. Macmillan Company. New York.

**I**N method Chekhov would appear to be a detached realist of the Impersonal Succession; in character one suspects him of being a realist by sheer fascination with his perceptions. There is a matter-of-factness about his ironical folk and middle-class tales that would reduce their content to so much ineloquent information were it not for his seeming-ingenuous absorption in his narrative, and his reliable and perennial sense of effect, which is so fine that the edged picturing survives even the process of translation. He has that bias for a diminished range of spirit which Henry James thought deplorable in Flaubert: no splendid persons, no fine cases, no heightened characters.

One feels Chekhov, in these stories, to be a confirmed dealer in the lore of human petty actuality, the endless small defeats that men accomplish for one another. Underneath and carefully never overflowing his impersonality, his perfect assiduity to fact, is as abiding an irony as Thomas Hardy's, without Hardy's admiration for men and women, with a touch, perhaps, of something cousin-german to contempt. We hear from Chekhov truly little of the stature and dignity of man; his typical characters cut uninspiring figures enough. The third tale in the present volume, *The Letter*, is, for instance, a thoroughly Chekhovian piece. Deacon Liubimov, in this story, is so much disturbed by the wild career of an absent raffish son that he implores Father Fyodor to help him compose a letter which will head the young rake-hell back to the strait gate. Father Fyodor dictates, Deacon Liubimov writes. In the Deacon's eyes the result is a masterpiece of reproach. To know that his old father could be capable of such dignity and eloquence must infallibly shame the scapegrace into righteousness. But before the Deacon could send off this imposing exhortation he must needs sit down and add on his own account at the bottom of the letter:

"They have sent us a new inspector. He's much friskier than the old one. He's a great one for dancing and talking, and there's noth-

ing he can't do, so that all the Govorovsky girls are crazy about him. Our military chief will soon get the sack too, they say. High time he did!"

The poor old Deacon is fairly embalmed in irony.

Yet Chekhov, notwithstanding dry exactnesses like the foregoing, has a fresh and fascinated cordiality of picturing that few realists can muster. He does not furnish, it is true, the filled-full sense of acquaintance that a three-ply Saxon realistic epic lavishes on us; he is not the realist of the itemized account. And he is as little disposed to the accurate, morose baldness, the mere tractarian ripping of decent illusions that Artzibashev practises. His realism is not his theory, really; it is his character, his unflagging native interest. Conditioned always, it is true, by a very article-of-faith reserve, he has, more than most realists, a robust inheritance in the foundation instinct of the natural dramatist: the frank appetite for personality, even abject personality, the gusto for *Sturm und Drang*, even if they are petty, the power of stomach, the zest in acquaintance, the expert interest in everything human. His eyes have seen all with the most absorbed interest, his ears have heard all with the freshest wonder. His perceptions have never gone stale; impressions have formed upon his sensibility inexhaustibly, always full coloured, varied, insistent, real. He may work in the spirit of irony and be as laden with disillusion as Artzibashev, but he writes with a resiliency that Artzibashev, for all his simooms of power and passion, does not know. Few realists have known so well as Chekhov how to be spellbound. The capital instinct is in him; he is as intent as a fancier when the matter is the items of character and appearance, or the terms of personality, or the set of situation and scene. Through his detachment and against his irony shows something of the robust Pepysian, the thoughtful but eager folk-lorist, the chimney-cornerer with the gift of vividness. His vision of humanity and its purposes is not intricate, but the consideration of life has never failed to fill his mind and absorb his heart.

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