Aleksandr Chekhov

In Melikhovo

Translated by Eugene Alper

This translation came about as the result of a surprise. A few years ago I noticed in amazement that despite the all-pervasive interest in everything and anything related to Anton Chekhov, among the multiple translations of his stories and plays, among the many biographies, research papers, and monographs describing his life in minute details and splitting hairs over the provenance of his characters, amidst the lively and bubbly pond of *chekhovedenie*, there was a lacuna: a number of memoirs about Chekhov written by people closest to him were not available in English. Since then I have translated a couple of them—*About Chekhov* by his personal physician Isaac Altshuller (in *Chekhov the Immigrant: Translating a Cultural Icon*, Michael C. Finke, Julie de Sherbinin, eds., Slavica, 2007) and *Anton Chekhov: A Brother's Memoir* by his younger brother Mikhail, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, as have other translators, the most recent being Peter Sekirin's *Memories of Chekhov* (McFarland, 2011)—but there is still more to be done. The book by Chekhov's sister Maria, for one, remains unavailable to the English reader.

The following translation of a memoir by Chekhov's older brother Aleksandr is aiming to place another little patch over the gap. Aleksandr Chekhov (1855-1913) was an accomplished writer in his own right; although never rising to Anton's level of celebrity (very few could), his short stories, essays, and articles were published regularly during his lifetime. This memoir—one of several written by Aleksandr following Anton's death in 1904—was published in 1911. It will not flaunt any groundbreaking facts about Chekhov's life, but it will offer a warm and occasionally teasing account by someone who loved Chekhov and was loved by him in return.

E. A.

When Anton Chekhov was a university student and lived on Sadovaya Street in Moscow, his apartment was a magnet for many a visitor and rare was the day when Anton didn't entertain several

of them. Too often they were idlers with whom he had nothing in common; bored at home, they came to kill time. Unfortunately they called during his most precious hours, when he was trying to focus on writing, and then had no scruples strolling into his study, sitting next to his desk, and asking odd questions. "Anton Pavlovich, what is your opinion about physical labor?" Anton answered politely, but walking out of the room, muttered in pain, "They are robbing me of my nickels..."

At that time Anton earned five kopecks per line and to him this was no laughing matter. He paid for the family's apartment, subsidized every family member's individual needs, and made sure the food on the table would be presentable for visitors who might drop in for dinner, supper, or afternoon tea. It could be one visitor, or sometimes two and three. Truth be told, we his brothers did our part to distract Anton from writing, but we were family and our pestering conversations didn't count as robbing nickels. As for the others, it just didn't occur to them how hard Anton had to work. Besides, our mother and sister ran the house on Sadovaya so well that from the outside it seemed perfectly welcoming.

This explains why Anton longed for quiet country living, somewhere in a remote village, far away from the hubbub of Moscow and its roaming visitors. I heard him say wistfully more than once, "Oh, how much I would like to escape, even for a short time, to become the caretaker of some desolate flag station in the middle of the vast and empty steppe…"

After he graduated from university, his dream actually came true and he bought a small estate 40 miles from Moscow, near a village called Melikhovo. "Finally, I will be free of all visitors," Anton would say happily while the purchase was being finalized.

But his enthusiasm was premature.

The male and female pilgrims, who began raiding his country home, remember the way there quite well, I am sure. In Moscow, one boarded the Kursk train and traveled fifty miles south to the station called Lopasnia. Once off the train, the first thing one saw was a small buffet tended by an advanced-age-but-still-buxom Frenchwoman. In that backwoods area she was quite an oddity, an unexpected and precious shard of European civilization, and

every Chekhovian pilgrim—I mean male pilgrim, of course—felt it his duty to stop at her bar and down a shot. In the grand manner of a retired diva, she graced them with *Du cognac, monsieur? A l'instant, monsieur! Voila le citron. Merci, monsieur!*

On my trips to visit my brother, I too paid tribute to her brandy, if only to chat with her in French and observe her alien comportment. For that, Anton called me anthropologist. He thought of himself already as an aborigine of the area, well steeped in local matters, and attempted to convince me that her heart already belonged to someone, and that I had no chance for anything, even if I drank her entire buffet. He so advised other guests too, who he suspected might be overindulging in French brandy. But rumor had it that he himself had been spotted at the buffet holding a glass.

The road from the station to the house was short, only six miles, but it was unpaved and after a rain, deadly. Pulled by a horse, your cart plodded through deep mud plastering the wheels with thick and heavy layers of clay and making them intractable. In one section of the road, the cart literally swam above the road for half a mile, the water almost touching the horse's belly. It was a typical Russian road: travel it after heavy rains, bob and buck for two hours, and you will arrive with a back pain.

Of course, Anton had to use the road very often, but somehow it did not ruin his natural optimism. He maintained hopes for the road's bright (and paved) future. "All we need is to keep reminding the local government about the road and you'll see—in three years, there will be a real highway here!" He honestly believed in it and added smiling, "Then even dogs will have a better time on it."

The last comment was case-specific: it referred to three black mutts living on the property; I think they came with it from the previous owner. One, who had a white spot on his face, was immortalized by Anton in his short story *Whitehead*. Because all food and drink were brought to the estate from Moscow, someone had to travel to the station almost every day to pick it up. For some reason, the three pooches thought it was their indispensable duty to accompany the cart both to and from the station. And they

did it regardless of the weather. What drove them to make those twelve-mile round trips was a mystery. When they came back—tired, cold, soaked in water and mud—Anton marveled at their determination and sacrifice, made without any real necessity.

As soon as my brother moved to Melikhovo, he felt re-energized to be so close to nature and plunged himself into his new rural life. After a cramped urban subsistence, he suddenly found himself owning woods, expansive meadows, a vegetable garden, a fruit orchard, even horses and cows. To be sure, with them came agricultural equipment and many things to take care of, but Anton felt so enthusiastic that he took to tilling, sowing, planting, and growing quite in earnest—and did it all without almost any outside help.

From the start, however, our brother Mikhail and, especially, our sister Maria assisted him. Wearing tall boots and riding a horse, Mikhail projected the air of a ranger, so his duty was the fields and agriculture. Our sister Maria managed the vegetable garden. She took her responsibility so seriously that within a year the garden turned out a success. Aside from common vegetables, she cultivated honeydew, watermelon, tomato, corn, artichoke, and asparagus.

Anton's letters of that period were filled with optimism. He jokingly signed them *Land Proprietor* and insisted that I should visit. When I finally did, I found such a truly idyllic setting that I too felt the itch for buying a piece of land.

My very arrival from Petersburg to Melikhovo was country-style dawdling. As the cart rolled into the courtyard, it was immediately surrounded by three black and shaggy dogs barking at the stranger. It took some minutes, however, before a servant girl lazily walked out of a shed. She looked at me from under her palm, didn't say a word, turned around, and slowly walked back in. Another minute passed and from the same shed walked out a peasant who barked at the dogs "Get lost, bastards!" They did. Only then did I see my mother, Evgenia Yakovlevna, cautiously walk out onto the porch of the main house. She looked in my direction, paused, then looked again, and finally said with relief,

"Ah, it's you Sasha! Whew! I was scared it was another visitor. Poor Anton has no peace from them..."

I got off the cart and kissed her hand—our childhood tradition—then we hugged and kissed. "You smell like wine," she said with reproach.

"Mama, I just had a shot of cognac at the Frenchwoman's in Lopasnia. I'd been told it was the rite of passage to Melikhovo."

"You shouldn't have," said mother. "I've been wondering about that Frenchwoman; I wish I could take a really good look at her. Well, go, go see Anton, he's in his study."

"And sister?" I asked.

"In the garden somewhere, she spends all day working, working, working, you couldn't drag her out of there," said mother. "Do you want tea or coffee? In Petersburg you all drink coffee, don't you?"

"Anything would be good, Mama."

"We'll have lunch soon," she said. "We are here on Anton's country-style schedule—wake up early, have tea at eight, eat lunch at noon. Now go see him."

Anton was sitting at his desk near a big, triple-size window framing a lovely view of the garden: a path lined with corn and decorative plants. One of the walls of the study had black shelves from floor to ceiling filled with books. Anton was glad to see me and wasted no time to start showcasing his new possessions. We walked out and I realized how close at hand everything was at the estate: the main house, accessory structures, the courtyard, the vegetable garden, and the orchard; they were all conveniently grouped in one area encircled by a fence. Further away, along the road to Lopasnia, lay the hayfields, the meadows, and the woods nicknamed Sazonikha.

The orchard was rather unkempt, but it made it appear especially charming. It was all overgrown with tall and thick grass and a majestic old tree reigned over it; it looked particularly powerful among its neighbour saplings. The tree was truly stunning, with its long branches, wrinkled and pockmarked bark, and many hollows. To hug its mighty trunk it would take two people. Our family gave the tree a Biblical name, *The Oak of*

Mamre. My brother Mikhail hung on one of its branches a birdhouse with several little compartments and a tiny welcoming sign, *The Starling Bros Pub*.

Throughout the orchard there were many more birdhouses; Anton liked the coming of spring and enjoyed watching the melting of snow, the budding of trees, and the arrival of birds. Starlings were his favorites and I remember one of his letters saying, "Here, starlings have already arrived; they started building nests and singing. How about where you are, in the north? Are they there yet?"

My visit to the estate happened to be at the end of spring when plant life in the Moscow countryside was in full bloom. Blossoming daffodils and roses filled the planters around the house and I could clearly see that Anton was very proud of them. He sounded like a pleased farmer when he shared with me his botanical accomplishments: "These roses were grown in Riga and delivered here—look! But those daffodils—I planted them myself. Now I'll show you two larch trees. I planted them with my own hands and you will see how well they are doing. Oh, in the fall I am planting gooseberry! I have heard that it might grow to be something truly special."

As we walked on, he often bent to pick up twigs and small branches. Instead of just throwing them aside, he carefully arranged them in small piles along the path. Later I learned that he routinely gathered brushwood, tied it in small wisps, and stored it in a dry place—for kindling the fire in the winter.

It struck me that my brother behaved like a thrifty manager, who seemed to live and breathe by his little estate, loving it, caring for it, enjoying its coziness and country spirit. Truth be told, he had to pay for this pleasure out of his pocket—the estate did not bring any profit. But it was worth it: it benefited his psyche, it gave him the comfort of knowing he had a place of his own. Perhaps a form of self-hypnosis, but it worked for him. Before walking to the orchard or the fields, for example, he would put on tall boots. Not because of bad weather, it was perfectly dry and he could walk in his city shoes. But he was now in the country, and in the country, one wears tall boots.

We reached the vegetable garden and I saw what I thought was a peasant woman assiduously digging the soil. She wore a simple cotton dress and a headscarf. Only as we got closer did I recognize my sister Maria.

"Sasha-Terentiasha!" she called me by my childhood nickname. "I won't offer you my hand, it's so dirty, just kiss me on the cheek! Care to see how we farm here? Let's go, I'll show you my veggies. Oh, what great cucumbers I grow there!"

And I, an inveterate urbanite, was steered along the beds and treated to a vegetable séance. Each plant, even a most common green bean or pea, was not a simple plant. It was special, almost spiritual. It had its own history, its own development cycle, its own role in the household, and its own warm and familial relationship with my sister, who planted and nourished it. Listening to her, I thought that if I had accidentally pulled something from the bed, even a tiny bean that could produce four or five pods at most, my sister would have been inconsolable. Even if I bought her a whole cart of beans to replace it, it wouldn't matter. Those would be from somewhere else, but this was *hers*.

I myself have experienced this feeling too. Some vegetable—say, for example, a head of cabbage or artichoke—may be worth a dime to buy at the market. But if you grow it in your own garden, if you care for it, if you spend time nourishing it, it becomes dear to your heart. And when it ripens and you serve it on the table, you eat it with double pleasure. This is absolutely unreasonable: it would have cost you a dime to buy, yet you have spent six times more growing it… But it doesn't matter—it's *yours*!

It is a very rich feeling; I don't know if many people get to experience it.

While I was looking at the vegetables, I noticed that Anton walked a few steps away into the tall grass and started carefully selecting and pulling something out of the ground. He returned with a bunch of grass in his hands and spread it evenly on the path.

"What is it for?" I asked.

"This is clover for the heifer. It'll dry here in the sun. She has eaten too much green grass and now her digestion is upset," Anton sounded like a real farmer.

With three more hours left until lunch, he suggested "Let's go to the pond and catch some carp!"

What he called pond was a pit dug near the house. It was rectangular, some 30 feet long and 15 feet wide. Fishing rods were just lying on the ground near it as if waiting for someone to pick them up and start fishing. Anton didn't comment on that, but his face had a proud expression as if to say "No one would steal them *here*, unlike where you are—in the city." We sat down on the pit's edge and cast the lines. Anton put on his golden pince-nez, and fixed his stare on the float. We were chatting about common friends, family matters, Moscow and Saint-Petersburg, when he suddenly stopped in mid-sentence and triumphantly pulled out his catch. The fish was the size of a coin.

"Toss it back," I said, "it's too young."

"Young? This carp is older than you and me!" said Anton. "But it's degenerated. There used to be real fish here; now all you get is small fry. I'm considering digging a really big pond behind the house and having real carp there! But the issue is water. This pond, for example, has water now, but in the spring I was worried that there wouldn't be enough. Mikhail and I decided to collect snow from the courtyard and cart it here to melt... Eventually it filled up, though, even without our help."

At the side of the house I noticed a peculiar water collection system, apparently engineered by the previous owner. An old barrel was placed under a rain gutter and a pipe attached to the barrel's bottom ran straight to the pond. Looking at this contrivance, I doubted how much water the system could actually procure.

Before lunch each of us managed to catch (and let go) a couple of midget carps. In addition, I committed, unawares, a serious transgression: I tossed a cigarette butt into the pond.

"Don't throw butts into the water," said Anton seriously.

"Come on," I retorted, "with all the filth already floating there…"

"Nicotine poisons the water and may poison the fish too," Anton was wearing two hats—a physician and a dedicated landowner.

Just as we were about to sit down for lunch, two unexciting visitors arrived from Moscow. As soon as the barefooted servant girl announced them, Anton's face grew sour and mother began complaining: "Dear God, I don't have anything extra ready for lunch! How am I supposed to feed them? Oh, why do they keep coming? There is no peace from them." Finally, she told servant Anyuta to bring two more plates.

The guests sauntered in and immediately monopolized the conversation. They talked as though their visit was a huge favor to Anton. They drank a lot of vodka, ate a lot, and talked about the most dreary things. My brother remained polite and did not show how he really felt about the company. After lunch the visitors said: "Like it or not, Anton Pavlovich, we intend to spend the night here. We came to unwind and have fun. You wouldn't kick us out, would you?"

Anton answered what polite people answer in cases like this: he mumbled something civil and, as was his habit after lunch, went to his little bedroom and locked the door. The guests, meanwhile, probed my father: "Do you have hay somewhere close by? On a visit to the countryside, you know, it would be nice to *wallow* in freshly cut hay… What? It's too early in the season for haymaking? Really? Too bad, too bad…"

"Mother of God!" said mother after the guests went to the orchard to have a smoke and enjoy nature. "Where will I put them to sleep? On what? Did they even ask if we had extra blankets and pillows! No, they just said we're staying! I'd understand if they were close friends, but these are almost strangers. And Anton doesn't like them; I can see he doesn't."

"Some tourists!" father echoed sourly, "They ought to be kicked out! Grab them by the tail and throw them out!"

Our father occupied a peculiar position in the house; sometimes one couldn't help but smile at him and his actions. Father enjoyed full deference. At meals he sat at the honorary place at the head of the table. (Anton sat at the opposite end and

the other family members and guests sat between them.) The first and best piece of food always went to father's plate. His opinions, whatever they might be, were listened to with attention. If he decided, for health reasons, to eat lenten food on meat days, mother always yielded to his wishes. At lunch and dinner, under the disguise of homemade liquor prepared from some mysterious plants, he indulged in vodka. He had his own cozy room, separate from everybody else's (I remember it having the smell of frankincense). He also had his own desk where he kept a big journal. It was his diary with daily and rather artless entries: "Ivan Petrovich arrived for a visit"; "Ivan Petrovich spent the night here and left"; "Sent servants to the station"; "Anton left for Moscow"; "During Anton's absence, Fiodor Stepanovich and his wife came to visit," and the like. In short, father didn't have much to worry about.

It would seem that in such a benign environment the old man should have felt healthy and in good spirits. But he didn't. His heart was torn by an unsettling incongruity. The estate belonged to Anton. Therefore, Anton was in charge, he was the master and decision maker. But father was not only older than Anton, he was his forebear. Therefore, due to his parental authority, he should have even more rights to give directions and order things around. Everyone should listen to him as the eldest in the house. He needed to show authority, he felt, or no one would respect him—neither the peasants, nor the servants.

Hence his frequent bloopers and gaffes, entertaining to others but annoying to Anton. For example, I witnessed the following. Not having anything better to do and for his own entertainment, father sprinkled the area before the house with yellow sand and was very content with his own work. Early next morning, however, several sick peasants gathered in front of the porch waiting for Doctor Chekhov to wake up. He never refused giving medical help; everybody knew it and the peasants came with confidence that he would see them.

This time they were out of luck, however, for they gathered right where the yellow sand had been placed so lovingly. When father saw it, he grew really angry and sent them away stating that

today there would be no consultation. "Trampling on the sand with your filthy boots!.. Get out of here!.."

When Anton woke up and heard about it, he of course didn't like the interference in his medical affairs. At lunch he sternly asked father not to do it again.

"Alright, alright, Antosha, I won't…" the old man apologized almost submissively.

But his thirst for power was unquenchable. It didn't let him sleep at night. Although he became kinder as he grew older, the idea that he could not order people around on his son's estate was hard to digest. In his mind, he had given Anton life and therefore he should have all the rights over him. In addition, father was sure that old people knew things better than young ones—they just did!

The orchard had a few fruit trees of which Anton took special care. He expected that in the fall they would bring fruits and followed a special book on how to grow them. One fine morning, while everybody was still asleep, father took scissors and trimmed the trees as he saw fit. "It will be much, much better like this," he must have thought. When Anton saw his favorite trees so mutilated, he grew very sad. But again, father showed much humility ("I won't do it again, Antosha, it's just that it's better when trees are trimmed like this, it's prettier…") and was, of course, forgiven.

Sometimes he seemed rather comical in his demands. Once Anton sent worker Roman to go somewhere urgently. Roman was on his way when father sighted him.

"Where are you off to?"

"Anton Pavlovich has sent me to run an errand quickly," Roman answered.

"You've got enough time. Now clean up this path, pick up all the twigs and trash."

"But Anton Pavlovich said to do it quickly…"

"Listen to your elders!"

Father had lived a hard life. As a boy he worked as a shop apprentice and was beaten up very often. But when he became a merchant himself, he treated his assistants and apprentices with

the same kind of smacks and slaps. Once he was even taken to court for that. When he ended up in Melikhovo, at his son's estate, he may have been left without any meaningful business to occupy himself with, but leave behind his old habit of smacking he couldn't. It was a manifestation of his authority. Which was why he treated with an occasional clip the two servant girls, Masha and Anyuta. To my brother's outrage over this, father, as always, responded with a show of meekness, "Forgive me, Antosha, I won't do it again. But if we don't teach them, they won't listen…"

My brother was a reserved and tactful person. He never raised his voice and it was difficult for him to make even a lightly critical remark towards someone. So after father's conciliatory words, my brother would say nothing else. "You see how he disarms me?" he told me once about the effect father's words had on him. "And then he starts it all over again…"

Generally, father's behavior was more entertaining than annoying, especially when we saw how his opinions changed depending on the state of his stomach. Sometimes, for example, he ate with much gusto, sipped his mysterious herbal drink, and enthusiastically dilated on the subject of village life. "Truly, there is nothing better than life in the country!" he might proclaim. "Come, come all ye visitors, come often to enjoy our village living!" But if he happened to overeat that night, he would grab his belly in torment and forgetting the praises he had just sung, he changed his tune to "Darn village! To hell with it!.. Whose bright idea was this?.. It's so much better to live in the city!"

Once he got so upset with the way things were run in Melikhovo that he turned around and left for Moscow, quite resolutely. Apparently the city did not receive him as well as he hoped for; so in two days he returned. He quietly retired to his room and looked so guilty that my brother couldn't help but smile at him. During lunch on that day father talked all about the mess and anarchy of Moscow; the next two days he spent in his room reading religious books. But on the third day one of the servants reported having been smacked again and everything went back to normal.

Because of the many visitors and the frequent forays of us brothers, vodka had to be brought to the estate by gallons. This was, of course, well known among Lopasnia and Melikhovo villagers—peasants always know how their landlords live—but Anton explained to me their interpretation of it: "Father drinks less than any of us—he may have three shots and that's it. Yet in the village he is famed as The Drinker. The peasants say that all the gallons are bought for him only, that he drinks like a horse and then beats up everyone in his reach. In their opinion, he's the only one who drinks here, the rest of us are beyond suspicion. This is what smacking does to your reputation."

Once I wrote to Anton from Saint-Petersburg asking, among other things, how mother and father were doing. He answered: "Father announced that he needed to practice piousness and is now in his room doing just that. Mother runs around as usual, glancing at the clock."

I need to explain the reference to the clock. My professionally health-conscious brother established in the house a regimented and well-measured lifestyle, according to which lunch was to be had at noon. In the dining room there was a big round clock hanging above the door, and when Anton worked in his study, he sometimes walked into the dining room to look at the clock. When our caring and fussy mother saw it, she took this as a hint that lunch had better be ready on time, and started worrying. "Antosha came twice already to look at the clock and the cook is lingering," she would say, "what if she's late with lunch?" The closer the hand moved to 12, the more anxiously she looked at the clock and the more worried she became. Muttering "my, my, poor me," she couldn't take it anymore and ran to the kitchen. Of course, her worry was completely unnecessary—my brother never insisted on strict punctuality.

In the evening of the day I arrived, yet another, a third guest came. Although she was a good friend of Anton and our sister, for our mother the difficult question arose again: "Where will I put her to sleep? Where will I get the extra pillow and blanket?"

To address this very concern, a couple of years later Anton built a guesthouse in the garden. He kept three or four beds there

with extra blankets and pillows. Some of his biographers (there have been a lot of them lately) claim with a certitude worthy of a better cause that in the guesthouse Anton wrote his play *The Seagull*. That's rubbish. The guesthouse was meant for sleeping guests only and my brother did not write a single line there. A lot of nonsense has been published about my brother by amateur biographers, including things that never happened. For example, in a recently published book *About Chekhov* there is a cartoon called "The First Fee." It depicts, presumably, Anton Chekhov ogling a 25-ruble bill. The truth is, the cartoon portrays me, Aleksandr Chekhov, and my university friend I. V. Tretiakov. Anton isn't in it at all. But this is how amateurs write biographies.

Dinner in the company of three guests went rather merrily despite the fact that both men spoke platitudes non-stop while falling upon vodka and fresh radish from the garden. The woman guest and Maria chattered and joked, with father making occasional comments. We sat down at the table at eight, as always, and finished dinner at nine. The ever-polite Anton stayed with the guests until ten, then said good-night, and went to sleep. In Melikhovo he rarely stayed up later than that. My sister took her girlfriend into her bedroom and the servants began preparing two beds in the living room for the men. I was to sleep in the so-called Pushkin lounge, a pass-through room with a couch and a Pushkin portrait on the wall.

"You all go to bed so early!" the men grumbled. "We usually stay up until two or three in the morning… What are we to do with all this time?"

"Here in the country we go to bed early," mother answered.

"Well, Evgenia Yakovlevna, the least you could do for us is arrange a couple of bottles of red wine. That would help us while away the time."

After the request was denied—there was no red wine in the house—the men shrugged their shoulders with their faces expressing something like "What a lair we ended up in! How can he call himself writer?" and departed towards their room.

I don't know if they slept well that night, but I know that mother didn't. Hearing their whispers until early morning, she

tossed and turned worrying that they might start a fire ("God save us! Anything can be expected from such people!").

In the morning, the two guests slept until eleven. When they finally came to the dining room, they looked sleepy, sulky, and displeased. The table was almost ready for lunch and mother kept glancing at the clock. She offered them tea, while they were waiting for the more fundamental food to be served, but they requested vodka instead. They called it "let's do the first rough draft."

By lunchtime Anton came out, polite and cheerful as always, but at the table he had to swallow a few caustic remarks masked in allegorical form. Consuming refined vodka, the visitors reminisced about a certain intellectual they both knew, who retired into the backwoods, stopped cutting his hair, and became so uncivilized that he did not even have red wine in his house. After lunch they requested horses and Anton told servant Roman to take them to the station. The guests said a rather cold good-bye and left.

"Who were those two gentlemen?" mother asked as soon as the carriage left the gate. "So strange—give us this, give us that—as if we are a tavern. I didn't sleep all night; I was afraid they'd start a fire. Some boors. Who were they?"

"No idea," Anton said. "I don't even remember how we met. Maybe we didn't."

After lunch the sky grew cloudy; soon it started raining. Anton breathed a sigh of relief and said: "Thank God! Finally!"

"Are you happy for your crops?" I asked.

"Not only that. I like bad weather because it means I can't go out of the house and therefore will write more. Otherwise I am drawn to the garden and orchard and my writing suffers. Good weather steals from me."

With the rain tapping on the windows, Anton went to his study and began working. Mother took a nap after the sleepless night; father went to his room to practice piousness; sister and her girlfriend went to their room. The house grew quiet.

That silence, I recall, was special—country-style, pleasant, and peaceful—unlike anything one might experience in the city. In

such silence it must be good to write, but even better just to reflect. It was on that afternoon, in that special silence, that I first felt envy for my brother and promised myself to begin saving money to buy a small parcel of land. I think anyone in my position would have the same thoughts. In fact, I often heard other writers, who came to visit my brother and experienced this particular lifestyle, sigh deeply and plea, "Find me, Anton Pavlovich, some property nearby too."

An hour and a half later Roman returned from the station, completely soaked but not alone. He brought from the station another visitor, a Moscow reporter of a Saint-Petersburg paper.

"God help us! When it rains, it pours!" said father. Mother and sister began bustling around. Anton put aside his work and invited the reporter to the study. Maybe Anton was actually glad to see this particular guest, I don't know. I only know that I caught a few wistful glances he cast at the unfinished manuscript lying on his desk.

Incidentally, the reporter asked "What did you, Anton Pavlovich, do to insult Messrs. N and N?"

"Nothing," said Anton, "why?"

"I met them at the station; they were swearing they'd never set foot in your house again. They drank a lot of cognac and griped."

"So be it," Anton smiled, "by the way, who are they?"

"Don't you know them? One dabbles in doggerel and contributes to a tiny comic magazine. The other wrote a short story and for two years every publisher has rejected it. But both consider themselves writers. Didn't you know them?"

The reporter turned out to be more tactful than his predecessors. He talked with Anton only briefly, then left him alone and went to the living room. There he was entertained by mother, sister, her girlfriend, and me. He did not have anything new or interesting to share with us, but was honest enough to admit that it was swelteringly hot in Moscow and the purpose of his visit to Anton was to breathe fresh air and listen to the nightingales. But he had only today to enjoy it all, he said, for tomorrow he must be back in Moscow. Everyone sighed with relief.

The rain stopped about four in the afternoon. The sky cleared and the weather became just magnificent. Everybody, including the reporter, went for a walk and even Anton joined us. During our walk we witnessed a curious scene from the animal world.

My brother's estate was adjacent to the estate of a neighbor named Varenikov. In one spot the two properties were separated by a fence. As I mentioned before, my brother had three dogs. Varenikov, I believe, also had three. All six of them got along well and often ran around the fields and roads as one pack. However, each dog knew which property it belonged to. When we set off on our walk that afternoon, our dogs tagged along and everything was alright until we reached the fence. Then something strange happened. Our dogs on our side and the neighbor's dogs on the other side started such a heated squabble that if there hadn't been a fence between them, we thought they might tear each other to pieces. But as soon as we passed the fence, the squabble ended as suddenly as it began.

"A dog's mind is a mystery," said Anton. "These dogs usually live in peace and harmony and wag tails at each other. But as soon as I or my neighbor appear near the fence, they start war. Are they trying to show us something?" He then christened the scene *The Montagues and Capulets*.

Later that day my physician brother had a reason to be seriously alarmed about our father's health. At dinner vodka was unavailable because the two previous guests had depleted the valuable reserve. But this was discovered too late—Roman had already left for the station and there was no way to communicate to him to buy it. But father felt like drinking something strong and requested methanol that mother used in her burner for making coffee. He got it and without hesitation poured it into his herb-filled carafe, added some water, and drank it in lieu of vodka. He found it to be quite good too. Anton expressed concern that something might happen to him, but father turned out to be just fine.

We all left the next morning: the reporter, sister's girlfriend, and I. On my way to Saint-Petersburg I thought how enchanted I

had been by the beauty of the country, and envy crept into my heart.

The letters that I continued to receive from my brother were still cheerful and optimistic, although they had occasional "All would be great if not for the frequent visitors."

In the winter of 1891—1892 I visited Melikhovo again. As before there were a number of guests staying in the house. And everything still seemed the same except Anton's cough. It worsened, but he explained it away as bronchitis. His study had changed too: the books disappeared from the bookshelves. They had been sent to the library in Taganrog, our hometown. That library was later named after Anton. As for mother and sister, they still bragged about the wonderful pickles from the family garden and their hospitality was still undiminished.

If I am not mistaken my next visit took place in May of the following year. At that time the new guesthouse and bathhouse had already been built. The village church had new mirror crosses that could be seen from far away, Anton had paid for them. Anton was also active as a country doctor, treating patients free of charge, and as a trustee of the local school. At the same time he continued writing quite a lot. He did all that despite the hordes of guests that literally seized on him and took away his valuable time. As I found out by accident, he tried to recover some of the lost time at the expense of his own health. Once we sat in his tiny bedroom talking, when I asked him why he had a large desk by his bed instead of a small night table. "Sometimes I write at night," he admitted reluctantly.

His coughing was already much more frequent and hard. I knew from experience that when I rode a bicycle I breathed deeper so I asked him why he wouldn't try bicycling. With a tinge of sadness in his voice he answered, "No, a bicycle wouldn't help me. Now I can't even stay outdoors at night. I have to leave the garden and go inside by six."

"How do you define the condition?" I asked. "What is your self-diagnosis?"

"Catarrhus pulmonum," he answered in Latin.

During that visit I stayed at my brother's for several days and we talked to our hearts' content. I noticed that, as before, Anton was tactful and reserved, but also unusually mild. He laughed much less now, he seemed more indifferent. He did not complain about anything. I noticed that when he came across something unpleasant, he simply walked away from it, without a fight.

During those few days that I was visiting, our father had the fancy to hold a prayer service in front of the house. He strewed the ground with sand, set up tables, and put up several icons. More icons were to be brought by the priests from the church. All family and servants were instructed to attend the prayer. But my brother liked things unpretentious and unvarnished; he couldn't stand turgid rituals. Any pomposity—even the simple act of strewing sand over the natural ground—was annoying to him. "Like they are expecting the governor's visit," he said with displeasure. "What is all this masquerade for? Why doesn't one be yourself?" Then he took a long walk to the village, he had a sick patient there. I and two other guests took a stroll too. Because the cook was taken away from her kitchen, lunch was served later than usual and mother glanced at the clock more often and more nervously than usual.

"So why did you, Anton, and your guests not come to the prayer?" father started questioning us with a solemn expression on his face. But then he met with my brother's tired glance and stopped short, as if he suddenly felt awkward. Maybe he realized that Anton had left the house and taken the tiring walk to escape the pomposity. Maybe it occurred to him that what the prayer had demonstrated was not his faith but his vanity. Maybe he understood that all the prayer had accomplished was to say, *look at us*. *We* organize services not in church but in our home; for *us* they bring icons from the church, *we* are worthy of respect…

After lunch a shop assistant came for medical help—he had a deep cut on his hand. My brother came out of the house to see him; I followed. Although the man's hand was wrapped in a piece of cloth, it was already soaked and blood was dripping. Anton requested ice and then spent half an hour working on the patient. Finally he was able to stop the bleeding. He advised the man to go

to the hospital where the doctor had necessary tools and materials for further treatment.

The man put on his hat, said good-bye and left.

"Did you hear that?" Anton asked me. "He didn't even say thank-you. As if I was obligated to work on him. A simple peasant will always thank you, but sly ones like him, with foppish hats and fashionable boots, never. People of this sort are awfully ignorant but arrogant at the same time. I have seen many of them and noticed how they change: as soon as they leave behind their village, they forget their peasant roots and turn into haughty rubes."

At dinner there were guests and, if I remember correctly, two ladies among them. As usual, there was much joking and laughter. But after dinner something unexpected and sad happened.

Around ten the pleasant evening was over and everybody left the table. I was to sleep in the guesthouse and walked there planning to go to bed right away. But suddenly I heard a nightingale: he started singing and the sounds were so close, so loud, and so beautiful that I forgot about sleeping and spent an hour or so just sitting by the window and listening to him. Other than the singing, the night was very quiet.

Suddenly I heard uneasy and anxious voices. They sounded very close to the orchard and then at once the bell near the house began to toll! I saw the curtain on my window glow in red and pink. I ran out the door and looked around. Right next to the estate stood a peasant hut—its roof was on fire! I ran towards it and in a few moments reached the hut. I just wanted to see what was going on, but then I saw a woman pacing quickly near the porch and moaning "The old man is there! The old man is there!" There was still no danger and I ran into the hut and pushed out of it, against his own resistance, a drunk old man. He seemed stupefied and dazed. I saw other peasants running from the village and a few of them were dragging a decrepit pumping machine. A young man, who also seemed drunk and because of that overly confident, grabbed the hose and started sprinkling water onto the flames. He did it for about an hour and a half,

sucking out almost an entire puddle nearby, but it didn't help and the hut burned down almost completely.

Anton and other guests came to the fire too. It wasn't good for my brother to be outside so late, but of course the situation was exceptional. It was eerie too: the crackling sounds of the burning hut, the red billows of smoke rising into the night sky, the din of worried people, and—over and above all that, only a short distance away—the nightingale still singing at the top of his lungs.

Then we learned how the fire had started, a surprise in itself.

The hut's owner (the old man I pushed out) was in the hut drinking with one of his buddies until they went senseless. The old man then said, "Let's set the hut on fire" and his buddy said, "Let's do it." "We'll see how it burns," said the old man and ordered his wife to start dragging their trunks outside. The old woman took out their meager goods, whatever she could, while the old man climbed the ladder and lit the roof's thatch. Then he slid down and sat on the bench inside the hut. His drinking buddy, realizing that things were turning serious, just fled.

The next morning I saw the old man again. Mother had told me to catch some carp for father, who ate only fish on Wednesdays, so I walked to the large pond. It was the pond that Anton had dug recently and where he had put large carp for breeding. More than two hundred trees were planted around it too, promising good shade in the future. As I set my fishing rods, I saw two local officials pass by. They were escorting the old drunk. Now he was considered an arsonist and they led him to the district police superintendent. When he saw me, the old man stopped and asked for alms.

Six months later in Saint-Petersburg I was invited to testify before a court investigator about the incident and the old man's actions. In my testimony I tried to emphasize his state of drunkenness and disorientation, but apparently it didn't help. When in the following months I wrote to Anton asking about the old man's fate, his answers were always the same: "He is in jail."

After that I visited Melikhovo one last time. The estate seemed to be flourishing remarkably. All the trees and plants from the previous years had now expanded and grown thick. New

vegetation appeared and the vegetable garden developed very well. Your mouth watered when you saw some of its fruits.

Inside the house the situation was still the same: the clock in the dining room, the Pushkin portrait, the same welcome and unwelcome guests at the table, the same carafe with a mysterious liquid in front of father's plate, the same openness and hospitality. The only difference was my brother: he had lost a lot of weight and was noticeably stooping. Still, he remained affectionate with everyone and even quite talkative.

Once at dinner he told us, among other things, how simple peasants reacted to one of his stories. Once, he said, worker Roman asked him for something entertaining to read. Anton gave him one of his own short stories. In it, a peasant woman oversteps conventional morals but at the end invokes pity and sympathy in the reader. At least, that was what the author expected from Roman and his audience. However, Roman's opinion turned out to be unbending and his verdict firm: "A foul woman." Everyone at the table laughed at Anton's story, except mother, who barely smiled. After dinner when I came to her room, she said with sadness: "Poor Anton coughs and coughs." Mother's heart felt what was coming.

The next day around noon Anton and I sat on a bench in the orchard. We were in the sun but Anton was shivering from cold. He threw sorrowful glances around. "I don't feel like sowing or planting anything anymore. I don't feel like making plans for the future," he said.

"Come on! Trifles! You're just in a bad mood..." I knew I was saying clichés.

"Listen," he said firmly and looked at me. "After my death I am leaving mother and sister this and that, and for public education I am leaving this and that." He itemized his will to me and finished by saying, "Remember this. You're the older brother."

It was hard for me to hear this. Everything around us was blooming, growing, blossoming, living and breathing, lively and fragrant. But next to me sat a physician who knew his own condition all too clearly. He could not be deceived; he could not be

distracted; and he was writing himself off. God save us all from such dreadful moments.

That was my last visit to Melikhovo. Soon the estate was sold and all was gone—the tender love that my brother had for it and all the hard work and dedication he put in to make it the flourishing piece of land that it was.

To all of us, Melikhovo was also the place of a tragic family loss. Once, when my brother was away on a trip, father remained the master of the house. Being in charge, he enjoyed his status and sometimes did things that he shouldn't have done. One day they brought food supplies from Lopasnia, and father, who had suffered from hernia all his life, decided to pick up an 18-pound sugar bag. That caused a strangulation of the hernia. With great difficulty—first along the six-mile bumpy road, then waiting for the Moscow train for several hours, then sitting on the train for several hours more—he was transported to a Moscow hospital where they had to operate. The doctors were able to remove the deadened part of the intestine, but for some reason they had to operate for a second time and our father died on the operating table.

With time, Anton's health was getting worse and worse; he had to move to Yalta. From there he wrote to me, "Yalta is boring," which wasn't surprising to me; nothing in Yalta was, or could be, like Melikhovo. Nothing at all. Perhaps the only similarity was in the presence of visitors surrounding my brother. But in Yalta, their numbers doubled and even tripled.