

MY LIFE, AND OTHER STORIES

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My life, and other stories by Anton Tchekhov

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ANTON TCHEKHOV

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OTHER STORIES**

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Chekhov, Anton Pavlovich
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MY LIFE

AND OTHER STORIES

BY
ANTON TCHEKHOV

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TRANSLATED FROM THE RUSSIAN BY
S. S. KOTELIANSKY
AND
GILBERT CANNAN

* *Моя жизнь (Moya zhizn')*

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MY LIFE

THE STORY OF A PROVINCIAL

THE director said to me: "I only keep you out of respect for your worthy father, or you would have gone long since." I replied: "You flatter me, your Excellency, but I suppose I am in a position to go." And then I heard him saying: "Take the fellow away, he is getting on my nerves."

Two days later I was dismissed. Ever since I had been grown up, to the great sorrow of my father, the municipal architect, I had changed my position nine times, going from one department to another, but all the (departments) were as like each other as drops of water; I had to sit and write, listen to inane and rude remarks, and just wait until I was dismissed.

When I told my father, he was sitting back in his chair with his eyes shut. His thin, dry face, with a dove-coloured tinge where he shaved (his face was like that of an old Catholic organist), wore an expression of meek submission. Without answering my greeting or opening his eyes, he said:

"If my dear wife, your mother, were alive, your life would be a constant grief to her. I can see the hand of

Providence in her untimely death. Tell me, you unhappy boy," he went on, opening his eyes, "what am I to do with you?"

When I was younger my relations and friends knew what to do with me; some advised me to go into the army as a volunteer, others were for pharmacy, others for the telegraph service; but now that I was twenty-four and was going grey at the temples and had already tried the army and pharmacy and the telegraph service, and every possibility seemed to be exhausted, they gave me no more advice, but only sighed and shook their heads.

"What do you think of yourself?" my father went on. "At your age other young men have a good social position, and just look at yourself: a lazy lout, a beggar, living on your father!"

And, as usual, he went on to say that young men were going to the dogs through want of faith, materialism, and conceit, and that amateur theatricals should be prohibited because they seduce young people from religion and their duty.

"To-morrow we will go together, and you shall apologise to the director and promise to do your work conscientiously," he concluded. "You must not be without a position in society for a single day."

"Please listen to me," said I firmly, though I did not anticipate gaining anything by speaking. "What you call a position in society is the privilege of capital and education. But people who are poor and unedu-

cated have to earn their living by hard physical labour, and I see no reason why I should be an exception."

"It is foolish and trivial of you to talk of physical labour," said my father with some irritation. "Do try to understand, you idiot, and get it into your brainless head, that in addition to physical strength you have a divine spirit; a sacred fire, by which you are distinguished from an ass or a reptile and bringing you nigh to God. This sacred fire has been kept alight for thousands of years by the best of mankind. Your great-grandfather, General Polozniev, fought at Borodino; your grandfather was a poet, an orator, and a marshal of the nobility; your uncle was an educationalist; and I, your father, am an architect! Have all the Poloznievs kept the sacred fire alight for you to put it out?"

"There must be justice," said I. "Millions of people have to do manual labour."

"Let them. They can do nothing else! Even a fool or a criminal can do manual labour. It is the mark of a slave and a barbarian, whereas the sacred fire is given only to a few!"

It was useless to go on with the conversation. My father worshipped himself and would not be convinced by anything unless he said it himself. Besides, I knew quite well that the annoyance with which he spoke of unskilled labour came not so much from any regard for the sacred fire, as from a secret fear that I should become a working man and the talk of the