

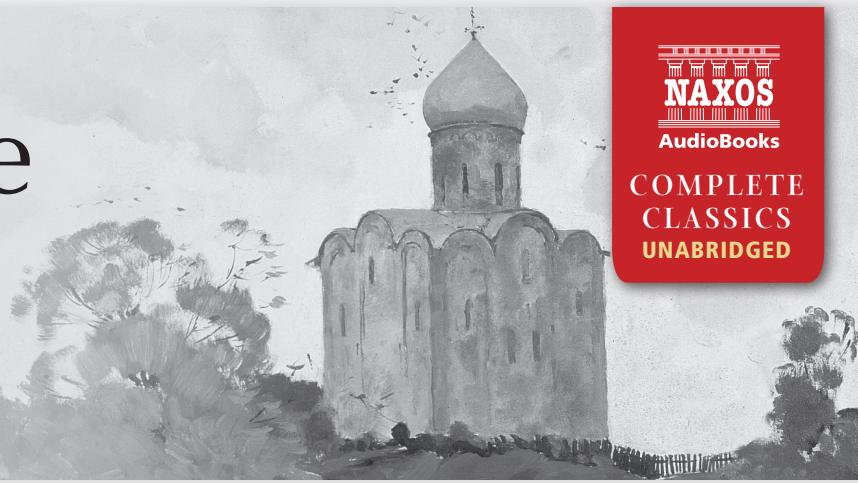
ANTON CHEKHOV

In the Ravine

and Other Short Stories

Oh! The Public • The Chorus Girl • The Trousseau
A Story Without a Title • Children • Misery • Fat and Thin
The Beggar • Hush! • The Orator • An Actor's End

Read by **Kenneth Branagh**

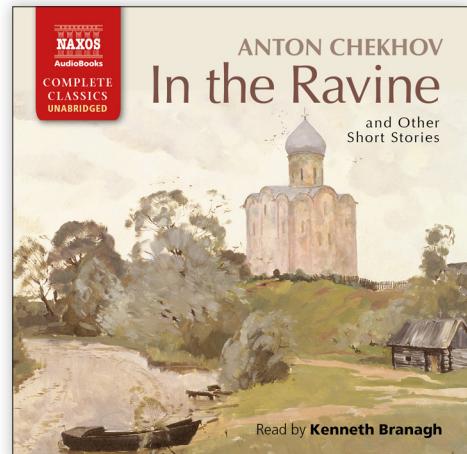


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Anton Chekhov is regarded by many as the most outstanding short story writer. This may be a surprise at the first encounter with even his most famous stories, because they are rarely driven by plot or anticipation. They are often gentle in character, elusive in purpose; but they create a resonance in the imagination that rings long. Here are twelve stories, from the brightly comic to the overtly tragic, each full of the sharpest observations of personality and situation, and with implications beyond their brief form: the dying actor, the children playing a game, the cabman with his tragedy, the orator's mistake and, perhaps most richly of all, a family laid bare in *In The Ravine*.



Kenneth Branagh, a leading figure in film, TV and on stage, is equally at home with classic and contemporary subjects. However, as director and adaptor, he has made a particular contribution to Shakespearean performance with his films such as *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Henry V*, *Hamlet* and *Love's Labour's Lost*. His productions of Shakespeare in the theatre have included: *Henry V*, *Hamlet* and *Love's Labour's Lost* (RSC), *Romeo and Juliet* (Lyric), *As You Like It*, *Hamlet* and *Much Ado About Nothing* (Renaissance), *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *King Lear* (World Tour) which he also directed, *Coriolanus* (co-production with Chichester Festival Theatre). He has also played Iago in Oliver Parker's film *Othello*. Among his other films are: *Sleuth*, *Thor* and *Cinderella*. He has won numerous awards for his work on stage, film and TV as actor and director. He has also recorded *King Richard III* and *King Lear* for Naxos AudioBooks.



Total running time: 3:35:38
3 CDs

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[1]	[1-1]	Oh! the Public
[2]	[1-2]	The Chorus Girl
[3]	[1-3]	The Trousseau
[4]	[1-4]	A Story Without a Title
[5]	[1-5]	Children
[6]	[1-6]	Misery
[7]	[1-7]	Fat and Thin
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[9]	[2-2]	Hush!
[10]	[2-3]	The Orator
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[12]	[2-5]	In the Ravine – I

9:19	[13]	[2-6]	II The elder son Anisim came home very rarely	6:56
13:10	[14]	[2-7]	III In the village Shikalovo lived two dressmakers	4:25
13:12	[15]	[3-1]	III (cont.) The day of the wedding arrived	3:46
10:17	[16]	[3-2]	III (cont.) When they returned from the church	7:19
12:12	[17]	[3-3]	IV Five days had passed	7:45
14:09	[18]	[3-4]	V On Friday the 8th of July	8:47
5:02	[19]	[3-5]	V (cont.) By now the sun had set	6:32
11:55	[20]	[3-6]	VI News had come long before	9:48
7:51	[21]	[3-7]	VII Old Tsybukin went to the town	5:08
8:38	[22]	[3-8]	VIII Nikifor was taken to the district hospital	6:25
15:28	[23]	[3-9]	VIII (cont.) Vavila got into the cart	6:55
10:37	[24]	[3-10]	IX At the present time	9:11

The music on this recording is taken from the NAXOS and MARCO POLO catalogues

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CIURLIONIS PIANO WORKS, Mūza Rubackyté, piano 8.223549

TCHAIKOVSKY ALBUM FOR THE YOUNG, Idil Biret, piano 8.550885

BALAKIREV RUSSIA, Russian State SO, Igor Golovschin 8.550793

Music programmed by **Nicolas Soames**

ANTON CHEKHOV

In the Ravine

AND OTHER SHORT SHORIES

**Oh! The Public • The Chorus Girl • The Trousseau • A Story Without a Title
Children • Misery • Fat and Thin • The Beggar • Hush! • The Orator • An Actor's End**

Anton Pavlovich Chekhov, grandson of a serf, was born into a Russia of tumult in 1860. In 1861 the system of serfs was abolished, although serfdom echoed through the social order for succeeding decades. He grew up in Taganrog on the Sea of Azov, but his family moved to Moscow when his father's business failed. There Chekhov studied medicine, which he was to practise all his life.

In his student years he earned money by writing, establishing a reputation initially for humorous short stories, then far more serious observations of Russian life. And finally came the great plays, including *The Seagull* (1896), *Uncle Vanya* (1899), *The Three Sisters* (1901) and *The Cherry Orchard* – his last great play, in 1904, the year of his death from pulmonary tuberculosis.

The plays remain the works with which he is most clearly identified. The short stories, often gentle in their character, faintly elusive in their purpose, rely on the portrayal of seemingly simple situations rather than masculine plots with a strong conclusion. For a generation engaged by Maupassant (1850–1893), with his overtly exciting storylines, Chekhov presented a totally different approach.

He wrote:

All I wanted was to say honestly to people: 'Have a look at yourselves and see how bad and dreary your lives are!' The important thing is that people should realize that, for when they do, they will most certainly create another and better life for themselves.

His short stories inhabit the same atmosphere as his plays. The words spoken and the actions which take place can appear quite inconsequential, but it is the confusion, the yearning, the hope and the anguish behind those words which form the real story. At first reading, or hearing, they can seem even pallid. But gradually the depth of emotion, of intent, emerges from even the lightest of brushstrokes.

This is evident in each of the stories here. *Oh! The Public* is a typical Chekhovian comedy, presenting the flustered confusion of the guard who, initially, can rely on his position of authority and do his job in his uniform – a contemporary figure we can recognise even now! But gradually he is undermined. And does his tormentor really have a ticket? *The Orator*, too, is a brief comedy which also has something to say about the funeral process, while *A Story Without a Title* pricks religious pomposity.

In *The Chorus Girl* the sympathies of the reader/listener rock back and forth between the plight of the wife and the plight of the girl, showing so clearly the complexities of the common triangle.

So many of these stories offer vivid glimpses of Russian life in the closing part of the 19th century. The sad, unfulfilled lives lamented by Chekhov seen no more clearly than in *The Trousseau*, with its picture of hopeless, forlorn existence.

By contrast, *Children* is a bright evocation of a group of youngsters having fun while the grown-ups are away. With remarkable economy, Chekhov shows what would have been seen by an invisible but sharp observer in the room during the game. The individual nature of each child

emerges in just a few lines, through their response to the game, to the others, to the lateness. And, as we all remember, such evenings are not entirely fun, for interwoven relationships are as strong at child level as later on; some individuals are caring, others selfish, ambitious or confused.

Chekhov wrote about the people he met and observed. The cab driver in *Misery* is desperate to communicate his tragedy, but those he meets – his fares – are either anxious to avoid involving themselves or are oblivious to it. With whom can he share his grief? The answer is the real tragedy. On the other extreme is the journalist in *Hush!*, living a fantasy of importance as he scribbles away.

Vertical or horizontal relationships abound. *Fat and Thin* expresses with a smile the social pecking order we impose on ourselves, while *The Beggar* shows that things are not always what we presume.

Knowing the dynamics of a theatre company so well, Chekhov set out to have fun, too, with *An Actor's End*. Fun, with a dying man? The underlying plot is so very Russian – the need for a return to the roots, to Vyazma, to die. But the colour of the picture comes also from the characters making their exits and entrances, dealing each in their own way with the situation. Here is the comic actor Sigaev, here is the *jeune premier* Brama-Glinsky, here is the manager Zhukov, the tragic actor Adabashev, the hairdresser Yevlampy.

And finally, *In the Ravine*. In form this is more a novella than a short story, yet not in content. Here, in Ukleeva, in the ravine, is an enclosed society with its own cycles of power, submission, blackmail, abuse, and profound Russian sadness. Most people coming into contact with the Tsybukin family are affected by it, some deeply, some only in passing. Grigory Petrovitch Tsybukin rules, for a while, but he cannot remain untouched by the shrewdness and ruthlessness of Aksinya, his daughter-in-law, the gentleness of Varvara, his young wife, or his desperate pride in his wayward son Anisim. Into this family comes the simple Lipa, who can only talk on real terms with the carpenter, and who can, perhaps, understand the tragedy that befalls her son Nikifor; even more tragically, she comes to accept it. It is the way of the world, Chekhov seems to say.

At the age of 26, Chekhov wrote to his brother, Alexander:

When describing nature, a writer should seize upon small details, arranging them so that the reader will see an image in his mind after he closes his eyes. For instance: you will capture the truth of a moonlit night if you'll write that a gleam like starlight shone from the pieces of a broken bottle, and then the dark, plump shadow of a dog or wolf appeared. You will bring life to nature only if you don't shrink from similes that liken its activities to those of humankind.

In displaying the psychology of your characters, minute particulars are essential. God save us from vague generalizations! Be sure not to discuss your hero's state of mind. Make it clear from his actions. Nor is it necessary to portray many main characters. Let two people be the centre of gravity in your story: he and she.

Notes by Nicolas Soames

Total running time: 3:35:38 • 3 CDs

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