

[Petrograd *Viestnik Literaturny* (Literary Monthly), November, 1919]

LEONID ANDREYEV: AS SEEN BY A FELLOW RUSSIAN

BY K. I. CHUKOVSKY

HE loved huge things.

You come to visit with him. He speaks only of the things of the sea, about boats, anchors, sails. He is a seaman, a sea-wolf. Even his walk is that of a seaman. He smokes a pipe, instead of a cigarette. He has shaven off his moustache. His shirt is open at the throat. His face is sunburned. Nautical binoculars hang from a nail.

You attempt to speak of other things. He listens to you out of plain courtesy, and then says:

'To-morrow we shall get aboard the Savva, and now . . .'

The Savva is his yacht. He speaks to you of shipwrecks, of submerged rocks and shoals. It is late: four o'clock in the morning. He still talks. His conversation is always in monologues, rhythmical, drawn out.

There was so much in Andreyev that was simple, child-like. Only very talented people, only poets can be so child-like.

You come again to visit him several months later, and Andreyev is already entirely different. Now he is a painter. His hair is long and wavy. He has a small beard of an aesthete, and wears a black velvet coat. His study is transformed into a studio. He is as prolific in his work as Rubens; he does not lay his brushes aside the whole day long. You walk with him from room to room, and he shows you his golden, green-yellow paintings. Here is a scene from 'The Life of Man.' Here

is a portrait of Ivan Belousoff. Here is a large Byzantine image, representing, with naïve sacrilege, Judas and Jesus with identical faces and a common wreath.

All night long he walks back and forth in his huge study and speaks of Velasquez, Durere, Vrubel. Carried away by any subject, Andreyev can speak only of that subject and nothing else. All the subjects that interested him before now become hateful. He does not like to be reminded of them. The rôle of a seaman is now forgotten entirely.

His tireless, energetic mind longed for continuous work. It was a constantly revolving mill that demanded new grain to grind. But there was no new grain, no new impressions, and the tremendous millstones of his mind kept on revolving with all their power, but they ground out dust, instead of flour.

Where could he get new impressions? He lived in Finland, which was a strange land to him.

It was really a pity that so great an artist, so impressive, with such keen and eager vision, should have been confined to the four walls of his home, amid the long-persisting snows and howlings of the wind. While his beloved Kipling, and London, and Wells traveled all over the world in search of new impressions, he lived in a desert, without any external material for his creative work. It is all the more

marvelous that the sheer power of his poetic genius should have enabled him to work on even under such conditions.

Andreyev applied himself to writing as he did to everything else, with an intensity that was exhausting. Months would pass by without a stroke of work. Then suddenly, with an incredible speed, he would dictate a large tragedy or a story in the course of several nights. He would walk back and forth, drink strong tea, and declaim whole passages, pronouncing clearly each word. The typist would scarcely be able to follow him, so fast would the words come. The passages would be always instinct with a musical rhythm, which would bear him on like a wave. Without this rhythm, which was almost verse-like, Andreyev never wrote even letters.

Andreyev did not simply write his works; his subjects always seized him as with a flame. Each subject would burn up everything in him. For the time that he would be under its spell, he would be a maniac. No matter how small the subject, he would always invest it with a huge setting, saturate it with figures of grandeur, for in his creative work, just as in his life, his favorite words were, 'huge,' 'monstrous,' 'extraordinary.' Each subject grew in him to a colossal size, became larger than he himself, concealed from his sight the whole universe.

At one time he was passionately fond of colored photography.

It seemed that it was not one man, but a large, constantly operating factory that turned out all those heaps of large and small photographs that were piled up in his study, filled numerous boxes and bags, hung on the walls and the windows, took up all the room on his table. There was not a nook or corner of his estate that he

had not photographed several times. Some of the pictures were extremely successful, especially Spring scenes. It was hard to believe that they were photographs, so much was there in them of elegiac music, worthy of Levitan himself. Every month he made thousands of photographs, as though he were filling a large order.

At another time phonographs were his passion. This became almost a disease with him, and it required several months to cure him of it.

Each thing that attracted his attention and became a subject of interest, carried him away entirely, became a mania that would last for some time and fill his whole being.

Andreyev was attracted by things immense.

The fireplace in his study was as large as a gate, and the study itself was like a market place. His house in the village of Wammels towered high above all the other houses; each beam was enormous, the foundation was a mass of Cyclopien granite piles.

This love for things immense, magnificent, pompous could be seen at every step. The hyperbolic style of his writings was a reflection of the hyperbolic style of his life. The great artist Ryepin once called him Duke Lorenzo.

His house was always full of people: guests, relatives, servants, children. There were always many children, his own, as well as others'. His temperament demanded a full and generous life.

There are men who seem to be made for poverty and limited life opportunities. Try to imagine Dostoevsky in the rôle of rich magnate; nothing could be more unnatural. But Leonid Andreyev was at his best when he appeared like a magnate. His handsome, sharply-chiseled face, his tall, full figure, his aristocratic

step, everything in him harmonized splendidly with the rôle of a magnificent duke that he liked so much to play in life. He was one of those talented, egocentric, ambitious, useful men who always want to occupy the first place, to be the captain of each boat, the bishop of each cathedral. He could not bear second rôles, even playing games. His most natural place would have been to march at the head of some pompous procession, in the glare of torches, to the tolling of the bells.

He always impersonated the characters he created. When he was writing *Anathema*, while working over the character of Leizar, the Jew, he would lapse into the Biblical melody and structure of speech even at tea and in private conversation. He appeared suddenly transformed into a Jew of the Biblical times. When he was writing *Sashka Zhegulov*, his speech reflected the intonation of the Volga population. I remember on one occasion I was particularly struck by his merri-ment. It appeared that on that day he was finishing the characterization of the Gypsy from *The Seven Who Were Hanged*; until the following morning he was the Gypsy, using the words and the gestures of the character he had just created.

He became Duke Lorenzo when he was writing *The Black Masks*. His impersonation of the seaman came when he was working on *The Ocean*.

This is the reason why there is such a divergence of opinion about Andreyev. Some saw him in his pompous impersonations. Some saw him as Savva, the chief character of his play. Some saw him as the student from *The Days of Our Life*. Some found him as pirate Chorre. And each one thought that what he saw was Leonid Andreyev. They all forgot that they saw before them a great artist, who carried in his

soul hundreds of masks, and yet sincerely, full-heartedly believed that each of the successive masks was his face.

There were many Andreyevs, and yet there was also a real Andreyev.

His favorite subject was death. Andreyev had the great talent of knowing how to fear death. It is not easy to do this. Many try to fear death in vain. Andreyev had the rare faculty of really experiencing the mortal horror of despair. This horror can be sensed and felt in all of his books. And I think that his passion for colored photography, or for phonographs, or for painting represented merely an attempt to save himself from the nauseating attacks of mortal despair.

In the fearful years that followed the revolution of 1905, during the epidemic of suicides, Andreyev, independently of his own will, became, as it were, the leader and the apostle of these men and women who hastened to forsake life. They felt that he was the one who could understand them. I remember that he once showed me a whole collection of letters from men and women who had committed suicide. It must have become a tradition with those who contemplated suicide to write a letter to Leonid Andreyev before settling their last score with life.

At times all this seemed very strange. When you would watch him walk through his estate with the confident step of a master, followed by his magnificent dog Tukha, or see him pose before the camera of some photographer, you could scarcely believe that this man could carry in his soul the tragic feeling of eternity, of non-existence, of chaos, of universal emptiness. But the spirit breathes wherever it chooses to aspire, and Andreyev's whole life was full of this

feeling of the spacious emptiness of the universe. It was this feeling that invested his writings with that peculiar philosophical coloring, for it is impossible to think constantly of universal emptiness and of eternity and not become a metaphysician.

This was the most characteristic peculiarity of his creative work. Badly or well, his works always touched upon the eternal, the metaphysical, the transcendental themes. Other subjects did not interest him. The group in which he found himself at the beginning of his career as a writer, men like Gorky, Chirikov, Skitaletz, Kuprin, were strangers to Andreyev in their inner spiritual content. They were interested in life as it is, they described life. Their minds turned to life, not to being. He was the only one among them who thought of the eternal, the truly tragic. He was a tragic by his very nature, and his ecstatic, effective, almost theatrical talent, which always tended to a pompous style and to immense, exaggerated forms, was best adapted for metaphysically tragic subjects.

As for his creative methods, very little is known about them even by his friends. He always wrote at night. I do not remember a single one of his works that was written during the daytime. After finishing a story or a play and seeing it in print, he would become strangely indifferent to it; he would cease even thinking about it. He could give himself over completely only to the work which was not done as yet. When he worked on a play or a story he could speak only about that piece of writing; it always seemed to him that his new work was going to be the greatest yet produced by him. He guarded it jealously against comparisons with his previous work. He was offended if you were to tell him that

you liked something he had written ten years back.

He could not change and polish up the things that he had written; he had much less taste than talent. His works were extemporaneous improvisations by their very nature. When he was under the spell of a subject, every detail of his life was drawn into the circle of that subject. Once he came to a Finnish town at night and engaged a cab at the station. When he came to his destination, he gave the driver a ruble. The Finn thought that was not enough and repeated several times with stubborn laconism, 'You should not give me a ruble.'

Andreyev gave him a half-ruble more. And several days later there appeared in *The Seven Who Were Hanged* the bleary-eyed Janson, repeating stubbornly to his judges, 'You should not hang me! You should not hang me!'

The insignificant incident with the cab driver was transformed into the central, the most effective place of the theatrically-pathetic story. This ability of lending unexpected artistic value to incidents that seemed small and trite was always one of Andreyev's strong characteristics.

Once he chanced upon a number of the *Odesskiya Novosti*, in which the famous aviator Outochkin, in describing his flight, said: 'Our prison is marvelously beautiful at sunset.'

This admiration for 'our prison' caught Andreyev's fancy. Several days later he was already working on his famous story, *My Notes*, in which a man becomes enamored of his prison. He concluded his story with the same words: 'Our prison is marvelously beautiful at sunset.'

But in his setting these words assumed an unexpectedly grandiose, metaphysical significance.

[Coterie]
AFTER LIEH TZU

BY R. C. TREVELYAN

ONE day Confucius the sage,
With his favorite disciples, Yu,
Tzen San, Yen Hui, and Tuan Mu,
Set forth upon a pilgrimage
To climb the sacred mount Tai Shan.
The sun was hot, the path was steep.
By zigs and zags from slope to slope
Slowly and wearily they creep,
Until, not far beneath the top,
They met with a solitary old man,
Rambling through the wilderness
Clad only in a deer-skin dress,
And girdled with a plain grass rope,
Plucking a lute as he strolled along,
And singing to himself a blithe and care'less song.
Confucius, wondering much, and glad to find
Excuse to pause and rest awhile,
Bowed twice and thus spoke courteously:
'Most venerable sir, I pray you, be so kind
As to explain to us for what cause
You seem so happy.' With a smile
The old man answered: 'Have I not
Causes enough for happiness?
Man, of all living things by Heaven created,
Is noblest. Now it has fallen to my lot
To have been born a man, and not a snail,
A crocodile, a fish, or a baboon.
Moreover, the more nobly rated
Of the two sexes is the male:
And I, who might have been
A washerwoman, or at best a queen,
Was born a male, and a philosopher.
That is my second ground for bliss.
My third is this, most honored sir:
Many there are who pass the gates of birth,
Yet ne'er behold the light of sun or moon,
But perish in their swaddling clothes; while I
For ninety years already have walked the earth.
What though I be but poor, and must die soon.
Poverty is the sage's lot, my friend;
And death for all men is the appointed end.