

## Erste Liebe

*I. Turgenev*

February 28, 2021

I have read this story before, whether in Swedish or English, I do not recall, nor do I recall when. Consequently I retain very vague impressions of it, except of course the theme of 'puppy love'. The story ostensibly has a strong autobiographical background, set as it is with the background of an unhappy parental marriage. The story takes place in 1833, with the protagonist being sixteen, while Turgenev was born in late 1818. His father had married a rich older woman, just as the father of the protagonist. Furthermore the father died young at forty-one in 1834, while that of the protagonist died at forty-two, also shortly after the events described. The father was a colonel in the Russian army, while the fictional one is a skilled and devoted rider. No doubt further biographical details can be found which correspond with those of the fictional characters<sup>1</sup>. In the story the protagonist Vladimir (occasionally Voldemar) very much admires his father as a masculine rôle model strong and handsome, whether this was true in real life can be discussed, but in the story the young boy longs for the attention and appreciation of his father, but only occasionally getting it.

The family has a house in a small city, one of its wings being rented out. This time to a widowed and impoverished princess and her daughter and their servants (because no matter how down-and-out you are, if belonging to the privileged, you have servants of course). The mother finds the princess quite vulgar and uneducated and resents her appeals for her help in some court matter, to which some references are made, but they do not form any part of the plot. By accident the son catches sight of the young daughter who is very beautiful and surrounded by a circle of young and not so young men paying court to her. He is struck by her beauty and immediately falls under her spell. So for the next months or so, he makes almost daily visits to her family, and joins her circle of admirers in all kinds of silly games, the purpose of which is to excite the young lady by the humiliations she can impose on the besotted courtiers<sup>2</sup>. Vladimir is of course the youngest and most innocent of them, which intrigues her the most, and she wishes to make him her 'page', meaning: to act as a kind of lapdog always in her presence. He is, as noted sixteen, while she is twenty-one, which at that age is a huge age difference, especially if the older one is a girl. She plays along as an unabashed coquette, and Vladimir is enraptured by the smallest signs of her affections, intermittently bestowed on him. His mother, as noted, does not approve of his frequent visits to that vulgar family, and more to the point one of the older admirers paying her court warns the young Vladimir of the poisonous atmosphere of the house, he should do well to leave it and devote his time to his studies instead, but

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<sup>1</sup> Ostensibly? In fact Turgenev has admitted that this is the most autobiographical of all his works, and one suspects it was written as a kind of therapy.

<sup>2</sup> One is reminded of the later erotic melodrama *Venus im Pelz* by Sacher-Masoch, which was actually published around the same time as Turgenev's book.

of course the obsession goes far to deep.

As it turns out the young princess, incidentally Saïda by name, spurns all her suitors, instead it turns out that her real lover is his father. Some intimations of this have been given, but Vladimir is of course too innocent to catch on. But one day he returns to his home only to find out that his parents have had a big row and his father has taken off. What has happened is that the mother has been informed by the infidelities committed by her husband with Saïda. There is some kind of reconciliation and they leave their provincial abode for Moscow. Sometime later Vladimir joins his father on a riding tour through the city having trouble keeping up with the fast ride of his father on an English mare, one only he can handle. At one point the father excuses himself having to do an errand and leaves his horse in his care. He is gone for a long time, and Vladimir's impatience getting the better of him, he sneaks around the building and discovers his father standing by a window having a heated conversation with a young woman, who turns out to be none but Saïda. He strains to overhear them, and then suddenly his father beats her with his horse whip across her arm drawing blood, the wound of which she kisses. He then enters the house and soon returns, and they continue their ride back home. Vladimir wonders what happened to the whip of his father, who tells him that he threw it away, and then sets off in a gallop which the son is unable to keep up with. He is stricken by the brutality of his father, realizing that this is part of the love-making, and thus is going on at a plane, inaccessible to and unimagined by him. Saïda has treated him as a child, and he realized that his love for her has been that of a child, and that the adult variety is something quite different from his own ineffectual attentions. Shortly thereafter his young and strapping father dies from a stroke. A few years later he encounters by chance the doctor suitor, who tells him that Saïda is now married rich, and advises him to seek her up, giving her address at a certain hotel. Vladimir is set to visit her but makes no haste, so many trivial things come his ways, and when he finally gets down to it, he is told that she had died a few days earlier in child birth. He can kick himself, having been so close, and now it is too late.

Not much of the story when now read rings a bell, but some of it almost does, just as a name may be on the tip of your tongue, but you are unable to release it. I have vague memories of it being presented as 'puppy love' and hence doomed and inconsequential, but am unable to be more specific in my recollection.

Turgenev never married, but pursued an unhappy affair with a married actress for many years lapping up the few affectionate attentions bestowed on him.

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