

On the Eve

I. Turgenev

January 20–31, 2016

It starts out slowly with a conversation of two young men lounging at the banks of the river Moscow. One Shubin is a nascent sculptor, the other - Bersyenev, a coming professor of philosophy. Both are marginal to the main story, but nevertheless described by that amount of detail that a reader will immediately forget, and which you often associate with beginners of fiction. But Turgenev is no mere neophyte, he is already by this time an accomplished writer and a lauded author, maybe he is merely, ironically or not, adhering to the conventions of the days, or more charitably, when writing those introductory paragraphs, he may even have written a lot of the story already (who believes that an author writes his books from the beginning to the end?) or at least have it confirmed in his mind, thus knowing the characters much better than the reader, and being unable not to write out explicitly what the reader will only gradually learn. The two young men are in love with a young woman, or so far rather only Shubin who is living at her home, while Bersyenev is just about to meet her, but after that it becomes clear to the former that he has lost out on his quest for her affections. The woman by name of Elena is raised in a typical dysfunctional family of the place and period headed by a retired military man, who has long since lost his interest in his wife and instead spends his time in the club playing cards and drinking or chasing women. The mother is a sweet but ineffectual woman, given to faints and tears and sulky retirements to her bed. In addition to the lodger Shubin, there is also a young silly German girl hired merely for companionship to the daughter, but in practice serving the mother.

In this rather prosaic set-up we need some strong personality, and Turgenev supplies a Bulgarian student and revolutionary by name of Insarov. While the other characters are ordinary people, some silly, some ambitious, yet with no more ambition in life than to have a pleasant time and optionally a certain measure of success as with the case of the two young men initially introduced; here we have a man with a mission. Someone whose sense of life and existence is not merely fulfilling individual needs and ambitions but to transcend them, if necessary to sacrifice his happiness and even his life. In fact he reminds the reader of the character Bazarov in 'Fathers and Sons' who likewise has a mission in life, that makes him larger than life itself. Compared to such a mission, in this case to liberate his Motherland - Bulgaria - from the Turks, most other things seem rather petty. As predicted Elena will fall for him, although initially a bit reserved and taken aback, he having not entirely lived up to the romantic expectations provoked by the tales her friends have conveyed to her. As Insarov realizes that Elena has fallen for him, his instinct is to run away. With his mission least of all he needs a Russian woman to interfere. She, however, will rise to the occasion, the love for him that has been kindled in her heart elevates her from her previous dreamy existence of confusion and lack of directions. In fact Turgenev conveys this nicely by giving excerpts from her diary, thus giving an unexpected diversion from his usual narrative technique. She pursues him, pins him down, and persuades him of

her love. He is overcome by the attention of this young and spirited woman and proposes marriage. All is settled, and from then on their contacts will be clandestine and conducted by letter. We learn that her father has found a suitable suitor for her, something she finds a bit amusing. She describes at length this suitor in rather objective if obviously somewhat detached terms. We learn that he is very much to the taste of her father, an earnest and practical man with good prospects, but of course of no romantic interest to her. (On the other hand the silly German girl falls for him.).

They plan to elope and go to Bulgaria. There is the practical problem of a passport. After a visit to a shady lawyer to find out how to get a passport for Elena without the knowledge of her parents, Insarov is suddenly taken ill, so ill indeed that he is on the verge of death, remaining in a stupor for a week, guarded by his friend Bersyenev, who was alerted by the landlord. This reminds us of Bazarov whose promising trajectory is cut short by typhoid. Elena also shows up. If he dies, she proclaims, she will die too. She is in a state of stress, the cause of which is of course hidden to her family. Eventually Insarov rallies after the expected crisis, but his recovery is slow. Then he and Elena marries secretly, and hence do not live together. Eventually her father learns from one of his servants that she is visiting a certain address. It comes to a scene, her father is aghast and threatens to take actions to nullify the marriage and thus humiliating her for ever. However, her mother intercedes and by buying off her husband manages to divert his rage. Soon thereafter there is a leave taking, war has broken out with Turkey and Insarov, although far from recovered, needs to be 'mis en scene'. At the every moment of leave-taking the father unexpectedly shows up in his fancy sledge and presents her with a memento and brings out a bottle of champagne.

We meet the couple a few months later. Elena is in the full bloom of her youth, her hair is ticker, her face rounder, her bosom fuller; while Insarov is already prematurely aged, with thinning hair and a stoop. We learn that they have been held up for some time in Vienna because of Insarov's poor health. Now they are in Venice to take a boat across to the Dalmatian coast to reach Bulgaria that way. While there has not been any description of scenery (except for a brief excursion to Tsaritsino lake) maybe because it would be all too familiar to Turgenev and his readers, now suddenly he makes a rather evocative description of Venice and their brief time there. Obviously the author is writing from experience, and as Venice must have been exotic to him, it has certainly engaged his curiosity and powers of observation, as well as provoking his desire of verbal description. It is a couple very much in love, the world exists only for their pleasure, in that engrossing and yet innocent way that is the way of lovers. They visit an art museum and laugh at the paintings, not maliciously but out of joy. They do not look at everything, being, as Turgenev notes sarcastically, neither connoisseurs nor dilettantes. They walk out in the street laughing at everything, in the evening they go to the Opera and get in spite of an indifferent performance so taken by the whole spectacle of a Verdi concoction. The next day Insarov is taken by a great fatigue, and overwhelmed by a great exhaustion. They stay at their abode waiting for the man to take them across, but instead a tiresome visitor shows up, and never seems to take his leave and babble with it. Elena is tired too, she has not gotten much sleep lately out of worries for her husband. She falls asleep and dreams strange vivid dreams, only to wake up to a frightful apparition of her husband, white as

snow, screaming 'I am dying'. And indeed he is.

A doctor summoned can only confirm the death, caused by an aneurysm aggravated by the poor conditions of his lungs. The man they have been waiting for arrives, they decide that rather than have the body interred in Venice, he should be put into Slavic soil. They embark on a hazardous journey across, during the most inclement of weather, and what happens now one will know. An epilogue gives the updates on everything. Shubin has great success as a sculptor going to Paris, while Besyenev goes to Germany and becomes an obscure professor of philosophy, and Zoya the silly German girl marries the suitor. But what became of Elena? And the novel ends by the words of the Author

Sometimes a man will wake up with an involuntary shudder and ask himself: Can I indeed be thirty ... or forty ... or fifty years old? How is it possible that life has passed so quickly? How is it possible that death has come so near?

Only to conclude that death is like a fisherman who has caught a fish in his net. He allows it to swim around freely for some time, while encircled by the net, and in his good time collect it. No doubt this is a feeling that must have come to Turgenev early in life, and I myself can very much sympathize with it. Where have all the years gone? Death being a net that surrounds you. Turgenev did not reach the age of 65. Incidentally born the same year as Karl Marx, dead the same year as well¹.

January 31, 2016 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se

¹ actually Marx lived fifteen days longer, born in May dead in March, while Turgenev born in November dead in September