

Rauch

I. Turgenev

March 28–30, 2021

This is a predictable story of a young man and a *femme fatale*, somewhat reminiscent of his *First Love*. Predictable, but yet gripping in its way. The plot can be easily summarized, told by Turgenev in flash-backs. The protagonist Gregory Litvinov is a young man of thirty who has spent some time in Europe in order to educate himself in the most modern practices of agriculture in anticipation of running the family estate which has been neglected for some time under the incompetent management by his elderly father. In addition he has chosen a young bride, in fact a cousin of his, and is all set to start his life. Before returning he stays in Baden-Baden waiting to be joined by his bride to be. One evening he finds a bouquet of flowers in his room, and on inquiry it turns out to be from a woman who has refused to disclose her identity. This puts him thinking, and Turgenev asks for the readers' patience, while he makes a momentary halt in his narrative and goes back ten years when Litvinov was the admirer of a teen-age daughter, by name of Irina, of an impoverished princely family of long standing. She ignores him at first, but then notices him and they strike up a friendship so easily confused with love at that age. Then the court is coming to Moscow and a ball is to be given to which Irina and her parents are invited. Her parents are adamant that she will attend, she will be exposed to high society and given her incipient beauty this cannot be but an opportunity. Nothing wrong personally with Litvinov as her suitor, but their daughter surely can do better. She, however, resists, for what reason we can only speculate on. Could it be because she knows what it will lead to and she is not ready for that, her attachment to her young lover actually being genuine? Anyway her parents prevail upon her suitor to persuade her that she should attend and he succeeds in so doing, on the condition that he does not accompany her. Why? Clearly because she understands what it is all about and he would only hamper her prospects? Predictably one exposed to high society, he is a figure of the past, and their ways diverge (entirely on her own initiative, or because the parents let her be adopted by a rich and influential relative, to which she submits?). Our protagonist was shaken to the core by her rejection, but recovered, and it is now all but a distant memory, but a memory nevertheless. So could it be Irina? He gave her a similar bouquet on the eve of the ball, desperately hoping she would change her mind. And then shortly thereafter he encounters her at a chance meeting outside a Gasthof in the adjoining mountains, to which he often escapes on extended walks. She is with her husband, a gallant general, and their friends, making up a high society indeed, into which Litvinov obviously does not fit. As predicted, one thing leads to another, and soon our protagonist discovers to his horror that the love he once had for her, had not been killed, on the contrary has swelled up again with an unprecedented force. After all, while she was but a child when they last met, she has now matured into a very beautiful woman, her once tawny, undeveloped figure, now having reached a tantalizing fullness. He fights against his feelings, decides not to play with fire but instead to escape to his waiting bride, but to no avail, he is overwhelmed, cannot but

confess his love for her, and she on her part, drops indications that it is requited. After all, has she not before confessed that the circles she now moves in are shallow and alien to her, and how she longs for his companionship?

His bride and accompanying *tante* show up in Baden-Baden and he meets them at the train in a state of pre-occupation. He tries to hide it, but unsuccessfully from his bride, who quickly surmises that something is wrong. Irina leads him on, and elopement with her seems a foregone conclusion. Out of decency he informs his bride and break with her, a fateful step that Irina can only view as overhasty not to say stupid and premature. She drags her feet and when the moment comes predictably gets cold feet and confesses her inability to break out of her circle and her concomitant standing in society; in the meantime our protagonists have taken steps to finance the adventure, because nothing but an adventure can be in the offing, an intoxication of desire with little relation to ordinary life. Now wonder Irina drags her rapidly cooling feet, after all she has not given much thoughts to the consequences. Instead she professes (in a note) her total devotion to him, how she cannot live without him, and could he not come to St. Petersburg where they could find a suitable occupation for him. The prospects disgust and humiliate him and he finally in his fury gets the strength to cut everything off and return to the family estate.

He pulls himself together, devotes his time to his estate, this being tumultuous times when serfs are being liberated, and does quite well. A few years later he learns by accident about the whereabouts of his abandoned bride, writes to her and asks whether they could meet again, if only briefly, and gets a warm welcoming reply involving an invitation. He loses little time but jumps at the opportunity. And so the story gets an unexpected happy ending after all. And Irina continues her career as a coquette still married to her general, who steadily pursues a successful career, greatly abetted by his in-grating manner.

So this is the overview, shorn of significant details and interesting supporting characters. Classical in its simplicity involving the stock character of the coquettish woman with irresistible allure and a natural mistress of the art of leading on. This is contrasted to the simple, wholesome young woman, whose love has nothing piquant about it, but is steady and genuine, and to be honest a little bit boring; but true love is supposed to be boring and anchored in the everyday, while the love that inspires vertigo, concerns nothing else but it itself, and thus it constitutes nothing more solid in the end than smoke (ДЫМ).

Supposedly the story was not appreciated by the Russian reading public when it came out. The aristocrats (referring to the artificial circle around Irina always affectedly dripping French) thought they were unfairly depicted, and the Intelligentsia around Herzen felt that they had made been fun of (and Herzen reviewed the book disparagingly). And Dostoevsky, a frequent visitor to Baden-Baden due to his gambling obsession, had a fall out with the author.

The German translation was made at the time of the book's appearance, Turgenev being a very popular Russian writer in the West, and has only been updated for a modern readership. However the book seems to be one of those recent printouts on demand. Thus it lacks the pleasant lay-out and font, which older paperback editions, such as those by the Insel Taschenbuch in which I have read other Turgenev novels¹ provide. The cover shows a detail from a painting by Ilya Repin of S.I.Menter, which shows a portrait of a picture

¹ Vter und Shne; Erste Liebe, in this collection

of someone who could have been Irina. A young lady whose allure is somewhat debased (as well as sharpened?) by an insolent gaze. Maybe not quite as beautiful, if shapely, as Irina was meant to be, but still with a definite erotic glow and also with a strong vulgar component. Who was she? S.I. Menter, was a pianist, hence portrayed leaning over an upright. The painting was done in 1887 and Sophie Menter (1846-1918) was a German pianist (a virtuoso in her time) and occasional composer and the favorite female student of Liszt, and also befriended by Tchaikovsky. Around the time of the painting she held an appointment as professor of piano at St.Petersburg.

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