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On the Eve

Ivan Turgenev · *1860 · Constance Garnett translation (1895)*

In the summer of 1853 two friends lie under a lime-tree near Moscow: Bersenyev, a serious student of history, and Shubin, a sculptor who laughs at everything. Both are drawn to Elena Stahov, a grave and restless young woman who is waiting for someone to give her a cause. She finds one in Insarov, a Bulgarian who has dedicated himself to freeing his country.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

What does it mean to love someone with a cause, and what does a person owe to a life larger than her own?

Elena is not satisfied with the Russian young men around her. Bersenyev is a good man and Shubin a gifted one, but neither will give his life to something. Insarov does, and she follows him against her family. The novel is a love story and a study of the Russian 'eve' before the great changes of the 1860s. It ends at Venice, in grief, and leaves Elena's end unknown.

KEY CHARACTERS

Elena Stahov
A grave, restless young woman who wants a cause.

Insarov
A Bulgarian devoted to his country's freedom.

Bersenyev
A scholar of history, steady and kind.

Shubin
A sculptor, witty and unreliable.

Nikolai Stahov
Elena's father.

Anna Vassilyevna
Her mother.

Kurnatovsky
A suitor of fixed ideas.

Grades 9–12

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01

Kuntsovo

CHAPTERS I–VI

In 1853 two friends, Bersenyev and Shubin, spend a summer near the Stahovs, whose daughter Elena is restless and waiting for something.

- The two friends are opposites.
- Elena's family is comfortable and aimless.
- Elena wants a purpose.

02

Insarov

CHAPTERS VII–XIV

Bersenyev introduces Insarov, a Bulgarian who has devoted himself to the freeing of his country. Elena begins to notice him.

- Insarov's purpose is plain and firm.
- Elena sees in him what she lacks.
- The Russian suitors fall short.

03

Elena's Diary and Decision

CHAPTERS XV–XIX

Elena writes of her longings in her diary. When Insarov announces that he will leave for Moscow, she goes to find him, and their love is declared.

- The diary lets us hear Elena's voice.
- Her choice is her own.
- The declaration is told with restraint.

04

The Family

CHAPTERS XX–XXIII

Elena's suitors and her family's intentions complicate matters. The Stahovs return to Moscow.

- Her parents have plans for her marriage.
- The suitors are limited men.
- The couple's secret is a risk.

05

Insarov's Illness

CHAPTERS XXIV–XXVIII

Insarov plans their departure from Russia, falls gravely ill for many days, and recovers slowly. Elena visits and writes to him.

- His illness delays the plan.
- Elena shows her courage by visiting him.
- Her love becomes a public fact.

06

Marriage and Departure

CHAPTERS XXIX–XXXII

Her parents learn that Elena has married Insarov. Turkey declares war on Russia, and the pair set out for Bulgaria in late autumn.

- The marriage ends her old life.
- The war makes the cause immediate.
- They leave Russia together.

07

Venice

CHAPTERS XXXIII–XXXV

Insarov dies in Venice in April. Elena goes on with his body; she writes a farewell to her parents and her end is not known.

- Insarov's death comes before the cause begins.
- Elena's letter is a farewell.
- Her fate is left open.

Purpose · Love · Freedom · Russia

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 9–12

1. Elena is the center of the book. Notice how she judges the young men.
2. Insarov's cause is not Russian. Ask why Turgenev chose a Bulgarian.
3. The diary entries are Elena's own. Read them for her view.
4. The ending is left open. Ask what Turgenev wants you to feel.

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