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ARTICHOKES AND ASPARAGUS

By H. E. BATES

IN RECENT YEARS it has become the fashion to divide both exponents and devotees of the short story into two camps, Maupassant fans on the one side, Tchegovites on the other. On the one side we are asked to contemplate the decisive virtues of the clear, acid, realistic straightforwardness of the French mind, which tells a story with masterly simplicity and naturalism, producing such masterpieces as *Boule de Suif*; on the other hand we are asked to marvel at the workings of a mind which saw life as it were obliquely, unobtrusively, touching it almost by remote control, telling its stories by an apparently aimless arrangement of casual incidents and producing such masterpieces as *The Darling*. From one side emerges a certain derision for the peasant vulgarity of the man who was preoccupied with the fundamental passions; from the other comes the tired sneer for the man in whose stories nothing ever happens except conversations, the drinking of tea and vodka, and an infinite number of boring resolutions about the soul and work that never gets done. To some, Maupassant's stories are dirty; to others, Tchegov's are unintelligible. To some the Maupassant method of story-telling is the method *par excellence*; to others there is nothing like Tchegov. This sort of faction even found an exponent in Mr. Somerset Maugham, who devoted a large part of a preface to extolling Maupassant at the expense of Tchegov, for no other reason apparently than that he had found in Maupassant a more natural model and master.

Odd as it may seem to the adherent of these two

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schools, there are many readers, as well as writers, for whom Tchegov and Maupassant are held in equal affection and esteem. Among these I like to number myself. I confess I cannot choose, and never have been able to choose, whether *Boule de Suif* or *The Steppe* is the finer story; whether *Mademoiselle Fifi* is superior to *The Party*; whether *Maison Tellier* is greater than *Ward No. 6*. In admiring them all I have learned from them almost equally. For me Tchegov has had many lessons; but it is significant to note that I learned none of them until I had learned others from Maupassant. I recall a period when both were held for hours under the microscope, and in consequence I have never had any sympathy with the mind that is enthusiastic for one but impatient of the other. Much of their achievement and life bears an astonishing similarity; the force of their influence, almost equally powerful, has penetrated farther than that of any other two writers practising the short story in the world. Both were popular in their lifetime; both were held in sedate horror by what are known as decent people. Tchegov, they said, would die in a ditch, and it is notable that Maupassant still holds a lurid place in the windows of shops specializing in the sale of contraceptives; an interesting light on a sales-technique which offers a stimulus with one hand and an antidote with the other.

The differences of Tchegov and Maupassant have therefore, perhaps, been overlaboured, and in no point so much as that of technique. Their real point of difference is indeed fundamental, and arises directly not from what they did but from what they were. For in the final analysis it is not the writer that is important, but the man; not the technician but the character. Technical

competence, even what appears to be revolutionary technical competence, can be, and in fact always is, in some way acquired; and since writing is an artificial process there is no such thing as a "born writer". The technician responds to analysis, to certain tests of the critical laboratory. The personality behind the technician, imposing itself upon and shaping every technical gesture and yet itself elusive of analysis, is the thing for which there exists no abiding or common formula. There is no sort of prescription which, however remorselessly followed, will produce a preconceived personality.

Thus Tchegov and Maupassant, so alike in many things, are fundamentally worlds apart. Almost each point of similarity, indeed, throws into relief a corresponding point of difference. Both for example sprang from peasant stock; both excelled in the delineation of peasant types. But whereas Maupassant's peasants give the repeated impression of being an avaricious, hard, logical, meanly passionate and highly suspicious race, Tchegov's give the impression of good-humoured laziness, dreamy ignorance, kindness, of being the victims of fatalism, of not knowing quite what life is all about. Again, a favourite theme of both writers was the crushing or exploitation of a kindly, innocent man by a woman of strong and remorseless personality; in Maupassant the woman would be relentlessly drawn, sharp and heartless as glass; in Tchegov the woman would be seen indirectly, through the eyes of a secondary, softer personality, perhaps the man himself. Similarly both liked to portray a certain type of weak, stupid, thoughtless woman, a sort of yes-woman who can unwittingly impose tragedy or happiness on others.

Maupassant had no patience with the type; in Olenka, in *The Darling*, it is precisely a quality of tender patience, the judgment of the heart and not the head, which gives the story its effect of uncommon understanding and radiance. Both writers knew a very wide world teeming with a vast number of types; not only peasants but aristocrats, artisans, school teachers, government clerks, prostitutes, ladies of the bored middle-class, waiters, doctors, lovers, priests, murderers, children, thieves, artists, the very poor and the very ignorant, the very rich and the very ignorant, students, business men, lawyers, adolescents, the very old, and so on. Their clientele was enormous; yet the attitude of Maupassant towards that clientele gives the impression, constantly, of being that of a lawyer; his interest and sympathy are detached, cold, objectively directed; the impression is often that, in spite of his energy and carefully simulated interest, he is really wondering if there is not something he can get out of it. Is the woman seducible? Has the man money? It is not uncommon for Maupassant to laugh at his people, or to give the impression of despising them, both effects being slightly repellent. "What they are doing," he seems to say, "is entirely their own responsibility. I only present them as they are." Tchegov, on the other hand, without closely identifying himself with his characters, sometimes in an unobtrusive way assumes responsibility. His is by no means the attitude of the lawyer, but of the doctor—very naturally, since his first profession was medicine—holding the patient's hand by the bedside. His receptivity, his capacity for compassion, are both enormous. Of his characters he seems to say, "I know what they are doing is their own responsibility. But how did they come

to this, how did it happen? There may be some trivial thing." That triviality, discovered, held for a moment in the light, is the key to Tchegov's emotional solution. In Maupassant's case the importance of that key would have been inexactly driven home; but as we turn to ask of Tchegov if we have caught his meaning correctly, it is to discover that we must answer that question for ourselves—for Tchegov has gone.

Inquisitiveness, the tireless exercise of a sublime curiosity about human affairs, is one of the foremost essentials of the writer. It is a gift which both Maupassant and Tchegov possessed in abundance. But both possessed, in a very fine degree, a second dominant quality, a sort of corrective which may be defined as a refined sense of impatience. One of the directest results of inquisitiveness is garrulity; perhaps the worst of society's minor parasites are not nosey-parkers, but those who will not stop talking. Few writers have a sense of personal impatience with their own voice, but it was a sixth sense to Maupassant and Tchegov, as it is in some degree to every short story writer of importance at all. Both knew to perfection when they had said enough; an acute instinct eternally reminded them of the fatal tedium of explanation, of going on a second too long. In Tchegov this sense of impatience, almost a fear, caused him frequently to stop speaking, as it were, in mid-air. It was this which gave his stories an air of remaining unfinished, of leaving the reader to his own explanations, of imposing on each story's end a note of suspense so abrupt and yet refined that it produced on the reader an effect of delayed shock.

It is very unlikely, of course, that Tchegov was wholly

unaware of this gift, or that he did not use it consciously. Yet if writers are only partly conscious of the means by which they create their effects, as it seems fairly obvious they are, then what appears to be one of Tchegov's supreme technical gifts may only be the natural manifestation of something in the man. From his letters you get the impression that Tchegov was a man of the highest intelligence, personal charm, and sensibility, a man who was extremely wise and patient with the failings of others but who above all hated the thought of boring others by the imposition of his own personality. Most of his life he was a sick man, deprived for long intervals of the intellectual stimulus and gaiety he loved so much, yet he never gives an impression of self-pity but rather of self-effacement. He was beautifully modest about himself and "during the last six years of his life—growing weaker in body and stronger in spirit, taking a marvellously simple, wise, and beautiful attitude to his bodily dissolution, because 'God has put a bacillus into me'".¹ Contrast that quality with the story of Maupassant who, at the height of his success, used ostentatiously to bank his large weekly cheque at a certain provincial bank, holding it so that those at his elbow might not miss the size of the amount.

Tchegov's charm, the light balance of his mind and his natural gift of corrective impatience were bound to be reflected in the style he used, and it is impossible to imagine Tchegov writing in that heavy, indigestible cold-pork fashion so characteristic of much English fiction of his own day. In describing the countryside, the scenery, the weather, for example, Tchegov again

¹ Intro.: *Letters of Anton Pavlovitch Tchegov to Olga Kruijper*, trans. Constance Garnett.

exhibits a natural impatience with the obvious prevailing mode of scenic description; in his letters he shows this to be a conscious impatience, and condemns what he calls anthropomorphism—"the frequent personification . . . when the sea breathes, the sky gazes, the steppe barks, Nature whispers, speaks, mourns, and so on . . . Beauty and expressiveness in Nature are attained only by simplicity, by some such simple phrase as 'The sun set', 'It was dark', 'It began to rain', and so on.'" ¹ To Maupassant the necessity of creating effects by the use of the most natural simplicity must also have been obvious. In that sense, perhaps more than any other, Maupassant and Tchegov are much alike. Both are masters in what might be called the art of distillation, of compressing into the fewest, clearest possible syllables the spirit and essence of a scene. Both were capable in a very fine degree of a highly sensuous reaction to place. Both, more important still, were capable of transmitting it to the page.

"The tall grass, among which the yellow dandelions rose up like streaks of yellow light, was of a vivid fresh spring green."

"Beyond the poplar stretches of wheat extended like a bright yellow carpet from the road to the top of the hills."

Of these two descriptions, so simple and yet so vivid pictorially and atmospherically, each creating its effect in the same number of words, it would be hard to say at random which was Tchegov and which Maupassant. The effect in both is beautifully and swiftly transmitted; no fuss, no grandiose staying of the scene, no elaborate signalling that the reader is about to be the victim of a description of nature. The words are clear, warm, shining.

¹ *Letters of Anton Tchegov*, trans. Constance Garnett.

Contrast their effect with what Mr. E. M. Forster has called "Scott's laborious mountains and carefully scooped out glens and carefully ruined abbeys", ¹ or with Hardy, who was writing side by side with Maupassant and Tchegov, as he struggles for six pages to convey the gloomy impression of Egdon Heath:—

"It was a spot which returned upon the memory of those who loved it with an aspect of peculiar and kindly congruity. Smiling champignons of flowers and fruit hardly do this, for they are permanently harmonious only with the existence of better reputation as to its issues than the present."

What are we listening to?—for it is clear at once that we are listening and not looking—a guide-book? a sermon? a windy report? Hardy is not painting a picture, but is talking about what he sincerely believes to be a description of a picture. His failure is highly pompous, entirely uninformative and unconsciously amusing. It is not even the failure of a man trying to paint a small canvas with a whitewash brush; it is the failure of a man trying to paint a picture with a dictionary.

Neither Maupassant nor Tchegov was ever guilty of this mistake; neither was a dictionary man. From both one gets the impression that they might never have kept such a thing as a dictionary in the house. The style of both conforms consistently to a beautiful standard of simplicity—direct, apparently artless, sometimes almost childlike, but never superficial. In Maupassant it is a simplicity that is brittle, swift, logical, brilliant, and hard as a gem; in Tchegov it is clear, casual, conversational, sketchy, and delicate as lace. Both, however, were capable of genuine elaboration, as and when the theme demanded it, so that both are masters in not only a wide

¹ E. M. Forster: *Aspects of the Novel*.

range of subjects, moods, and pictures, but of forms also. In such stories as *The Steppe*, *Ward No. 6*, *The Black Monk*, *Yvette*, *The Story of a Farm Girl*, they are masters of the longer story; at the same time both brought to the very short sketch, the significant impressionistic trifle of a few pages, an artistry it had never known.

It is indisputable that both were great writers, but if we look for a common and insistent characteristic, or lack of one, which sets them apart from English writers of their own time, we are faced with the fact that they were not gentlemen. In further discussing Scott, Mr. Forster makes the point that he lacks passion and "only has a temperate heart and gentlemanly feelings". But if there is one thing that Maupassant and Tchegov possess, though in highly contrasting forms, it is passion; and if there was one condition which neither imposed on their work it is gentlemanly feelings. To the English novel a certain moral attitude, or at very least the recognition of the governing force of morality, has always seemed indispensable. One of its most luscious crops is that of the bitter fruits of sin. Not until Samuel Butler turned up, with *The Way of All Flesh*, had any writer of the nineteenth century the courage to suggest that the fruits of sin are more often than not very pleasant indeed. Neither Maupassant nor Tchegov had much truck with sin; both declined to entangle themselves or their characters in the coils of an artificial and contemporary morality; both set down life and people as nearly as possible as they saw them, pure or sinful, pleasant or revolting, admirable or vicious, feeling that that process needed neither explanation or apology. To the old, old criticism that such a process produced a

literature that was disgusting Tchegov rightly and properly replied, "No literature can outdo real life in its cynicism"; and went on:—

"To a chemist nothing on earth is unclean. A writer must be as objective as a chemist, he must lay aside his personal subjective standpoint and must understand that muck-heaps play a very respectable part in the landscape, and that the inherent passions are as inherent as the good ones."

In short, all life is the writer's province; never mind about gentlemanly feelings: a view with which Maupassant, it is quite clear, would have been in firm and complete agreement. Like Burns, indeed, Maupassant and Tchegov pleaded for the acceptance of human frailty as a condition of their work—the acceptance of the fact that, as Mr. Edward Garnett pointed out, "people cannot be other than what they are."¹ In all of what he had to say about this frailty Tchegov was never cynical; he brought to it qualities of tenderness, patience, a kind of humorously wise understanding, and what has been described as "candour of soul", a quality which, it has been suggested, was by no means exclusive to Tchegov but was a virtue common to all the greatest Russian writers from Pushkin down to Gorki. Maupassant had none of that Russian candour of soul, but rather excelled in candour of mind. Where he was cynical, Tchegov was merely sceptical, and what Tchegov was really remarkable for, it seems to me, was not so much candour of soul as greatness of heart. Mr. Middleton Murry has called it, rather characteristically perhaps, pureness of heart—"and in that," he says, "though we dare not analyse it further lies the secret of

¹ Edward Garnett: *Tchegov and His Art* from *Friday Nights* (Cape).

his greatness as a writer and his present importance to ourselves."¹

This was written twenty years ago, when Tchegov's extreme modernity could also inspire Mr. Murry to remark that "to-day we begin to perceive how intimately Tchegov belongs to us; to-morrow we may feel how infinitely he is in advance of us".² To-day Tchegov still exercises a vital influence on the short story, and still, in many ways, seems more in advance of us than almost any other exponent of it, including Maupassant. It seems remarkable, for example, that Tchegov was at work when Bret Harte was at work, and died indeed only two years after him. Does the author of *Mliss* exercise a powerful influence on contemporary thought or writing to-day? Does he seem modern? Yet the work of writers, once printed, does not change. The words that Bret Harte and Tchegov put down on the page in 1896, for example, are the words that still appear on the page to-day. Yet something has changed, obviously very radically and very drastically, and if that something is not the work it can only be the standards, the judgment and the world of those who read the work. Time is the inexorable acid test. In a few years it eats away the meretricious exterior veneer of writers like Bret Harte, who thereafter go through a rapid process known as dating, and yet leaves the delicate surfaces of such writers as Turgenyev, Sarah Orne Jewett, Tchegov, Maupassant, and so on, untouched. Time knows no standards of criticism, and yet is the definitive test. "If a man writes clearly enough," says Hemingway, "anyone can see if he fakes."³ Exactly: if there is a subtler kind of faking

¹ J. Middleton Murry: *Aspects of Literature* (Collins).

² Ibid.

³ Ernest Hemingway: *Death in the Afternoon*.

it is simply a question of time, as Hemingway goes on to point out, before the fake is discovered. So after all, perhaps, the so-called modernity of Tchegov, and for that matter of Maupassant too, has nothing to do with pureness of heart. It has nothing to do with technique, except in so far as technique is another word for control. It arises perhaps from something very old, very simple and yet not at all simple of achievement: the setting down of the picture as you see it and feel it, without tricks or sham or fake, so that it never appears out-dated by fashion or taste but remains the truth, or at least some part of the truth, for as long as the truth can matter.

Both Maupassant and Tchegov strove for that result; both achieved it with a remarkable degree of success. The artist who fakes must initially regard his audience with some kind of contempt which is inseparable from any such attitude as "wrapping it up so that the fools don't know it". Neither Maupassant nor Tchegov wrote for an audience of fools; neither did any wrapping up—rather the contrary. Yet if we look for a strong point of difference between them it is that Tchegov's estimation of his audience rose a shade or two higher than Maupassant's. Tchegov, taking it for granted that his audience could fill in the detail and even colour of a partially stated picture, wrote consistently on a fine line of implication. Maupassant rather tended to fill in the picture; his natural distrust of humanity's intelligence inevitably extended to his readers. In consequence he is more direct; the colours are filled in; his points are clearly made; the reader is left far less to his own devices. Maupassant seems to say, in the logical, economical way of a French peasant, "having gone to all

the trouble to prepare the ingredients and make the dish, I'll see that the eating of it isn't left to chance." Tchegov, on the other hand, walks out before the end of the meal, completely confident in the intelligence and ability of his reader to finish things for himself.

This, of course, is entirely responsible for the most constant of criticisms of Tchegov—that nothing ever happens. The truth is that always, in Tchegov, a great deal happens: not always on the page or during the scene or during the present. Events or happenings are implied; they happen "off"; they are hinted at, not stated; most important of all, they go on happening after the story has ended. The reader who complains that nothing happens is in reality uttering a criticism of himself; the "nothing happens" is unfortunately in his own mind. Tchegov has supplied certain apparently trivial outlines which, if correctly filled in, will yield a picture of substance and depth, and has done the reader the honour of believing that he is perceptive enough to fill in the very substance that is not stated. Each reader will fill in more or less of the picture, according to the measure of his own perception and sensibility. But the man who can fill in nothing and then hurls back to Tchegov the charge that "nothing ever happens" is simply turning Tchegov's generous estimate of himself into an insult.

Tchegov, in fact, places immense responsibility on the reader. Gifted with a finely graduated measure of sensibility, perception, and understanding, the reader will not fail. But where sensibility is dead and the reader cursed by a kind of short-sightedness the charge of "greyness" and "nothing ever happens" is bound automatically to follow. Tchegov's method is therefore

a risky one, partly because what Tchegov supplies is a negative that needs an equal positive to give it life, and the chances are that it may never get that positive; and partly for another reason. Supposing Tchegov's exposure to have been wrongly done, too seriously for example, and supposing the reader offers a response that is not seriously conceived? In a moment Tchegov's serious beautiful picture produces exactly the reverse of Tchegov's intention; it evokes, and is destroyed by, laughter.

This is the risk Tchegov ran in hundreds of stories. As a perfectly conscious writer he recognized it and insulated himself against it in the only possible way, by his own sense of humour. In a preface to Ernest Hemingway's *Torrents of Spring*, a parody of Sherwood Anderson, Mr. David Garnett¹ remarks how Anderson, in *Dark Laughter*, pushed his style to a degree of oversimplified affectation that produced an effect entirely opposite to the serious one intended. Even to Hemingway, at that time something of a devotee of Anderson, *Dark Laughter* was altogether too much. To parody it was the only corrective Hemingway could apply, and to do so was, in one way, a courageous thing, for in parodying Anderson Hemingway was also parodying himself. But it was better to have done that consciously, as Hemingway well knew, than to have gone on doing it unconsciously for the rest of his life.

Tchegov, of course, could be parodied, and no doubt could have parodied himself. Parody is one of the rewards of the highly individual writer. Self-applied, it is a corrective. To a tragic view of life (which he felt that no literature could outdo in cynicism) Tchegov was

¹ Intro. *Torrents of Spring* by Ernest Hemingway (Cape).

fortunate enough to be able to apply a constant corrective in the form of humour. Beginning as an author of comic sketches written for funny papers, Tchegov was only with some difficulty persuaded by Grignovitch to take himself and his work more seriously. Luckily he never learnt that lesson thoroughly, and throughout his work the sly glance of corrective humour keeps breaking in. Tchegov, indeed, might be studied as a humorist. He delights in the farcical situation, the burlesque of life; he loves to play skittles with pomposity, dignity, and the top-heaviness of mankind generally; he adores the opportunity for discovering that the most impressive characters in life often wear false noses. Yet this humour is never mean; throughout the whole of Tchegov there is not an echo of a single vinegary sneer. The qualities also colour his humorous view of it; charitableness, compassion, gentle irony, a kind of patient detachment. Tchegov had no judgment to pass, through either humour or tragedy, on the most ridiculous or the most depraved of his fellow-men. In the face of the appalling forces that shape lives Tchegov offered no condemnation. He seems rather to have felt that it was remarkable that mankind emerged as well as it did.

As compared with Maupassant, Tchegov will always, I think, seem the slightly more "advanced" and difficult writer. Maupassant, guided by more logical forces, left nothing to chance. Like all writers working within prescribed limits he was fully aware of the value of a thing implied. By implying something, rather than stating it, a writer saves words, but he also runs the risk that his implication may never get home. That risk, in a very logical French way, Maupassant was less prepared to take than Tchegov. His pictures are more

solidly built up; he knows that faces, actions, manners, even the movements of hands and ways of walking are the first keys to human character; in addition to that he takes a sensuous delight in physical shape, physical response, physical beauty, ugliness and behaviour; you can see that nothing delights him so much as a world of flesh and trees, clothes and food, leaves and limbs; in describing such things, as he did so well, he was partially satisfying his own sensuous appetite. That fact gives his every material and physical description a profound flavour. When Maupassant talks of sweat you not only see sweat but you feel it and smell it; when he describes a voluptuous and seductive woman the page itself seems to quiver and pulsate like warm strong flesh. He knew, far better even than Tchegov, which words time and association have most heavily saturated with colour, scent, taste, and strength of emotional suggestion, and it is that knowledge, or instinct, and his skilful use of it, that constitute one of, his most powerful attributes as a writer.

For these reasons Maupassant's appeal will always be more direct and immediate, less subtle and oblique than Tchegov's. He will always appear to be the greater story-teller, working as he does in order of physical, emotional, and spiritual appeal. For even if a reader should miss the spiritual touch of a Maupassant story, and even the subtlest of its emotional implication, the physical character of the story would remain to give him a pleasure comparable to that of a woman who has nothing to offer but physical beauty.

This is not, of course, quite as Maupassant intended. For a Maupassant story is as closely co-ordinated as one of Tchegov; its ingredients cannot or should not be

picked out singly and sampled to the exclusion of others; you cannot pick out the choice morsels of sex and leave the unpleasant lumps of inhumanity, meanness, cruelty, deceit, and falsity which are so important a part of the Maupassant offering. Maupassant, too, had something to imply as well as something to state. One sees all through his work how money and passion, avarice and jealousy, physical beauty and physical suffering, are dominating influences. Humanity is mad, greedy, licentious, stupid, but beautiful; incredibly base but incredibly exalted. Maupassant, even more than Tchegov, was struck by the awful irony of human contradictions—contradictions which were so much an integral part of himself that he could not help hating and loving humanity with equal strength. In his attitude to women the force of these contradictions sways him first one way and then another. Women may be prostitutes, but they are magnificent, as in *Boule de Suif*; they are rich but they are also bitches; they are poor but generous; they are beautiful but mean; they are divine but deceitful; they may be farm-girls or lonely English virgins, as in *Miss Harriet*, but they are at once pitiable and stupid; they have beautiful bodies but empty heads and, alas, even emptier hearts.

It has been said that Flaubert, by taking the young Maupassant in hand, ruined for ever a great popular writer. Does the statement bear examination? I hardly think it does. Maupassant, it is true, was more prolific than his master, less an aesthete, more inventive, less detached. To him words and humanity were a kind of aphrodisiac, stimulating rapid cycles of creative passion. Many a Maupassant story gives the impression of being the result of something orgasmic. This force in him,

working unchecked by others, might have resulted in a tenth-rate sex-romanticist. Fortunately, it was checked by others. It was checked by the two things which combine perhaps more than any others to prevent a writer from attaining the junk status of twopenny-library popularity; remorseless clarity of vision and equally remorseless integrity of mind. Whatever else stimulated Maupassant, these forces governed him. They struck out of his work any possibility of fake, but equally they removed from it any possibility of moral attitude. Maupassant, of course, has been stigmatized by successive generations of the sewing-class as highly immoral. But it is the fact that he was amoral kept him from entering the most palatial spaces of popular approval and acceptance.

Maupassant and Tchegov, indeed, are alike in this: they are not part of the popular stream, "the great tedious onrush", as Mr. E. M. Forster says of history. Great though they are, they must always be, unless humanity shows some startling signs of change, part of a movement that is small if measured by the vast standard of popular demand. "There is a public," said Tchegov, "which eats salt beef and horse-radish sauce with relish, and does not care for artichokes and asparagus." To that public the flavour of *The Darling* and in a slightly less degree *Maison Tellier*, must always remain, unfortunately, something of a mystery.