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LEO TOLSTOY

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LEO TOLSTOY

The Death of Ivan Ilyich

Translated by
Anthony Briggs

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The Death of Ivan Ilyich

1

In the large law court building, during an adjournment of the Melvinsky trial, the members of the Bench and the public prosecutor had come together in the office of Ivan Yegorovich Shebek, and the conversation touched on the celebrated Krasovsky case. Fyodor Vasilyevich argued vehemently that it was beyond their jurisdiction, Ivan Yegorovich had his own view and was sticking to it, while Pyotr Ivanovich, who had kept out of the discussion at the outset and was still not contributing, was perusing a copy of the *Gazette* which had just been delivered.

‘Gentlemen!’ he said. ‘Ivan Ilyich is dead.’

‘Is he really?’

‘Here you are. Read it yourself,’ he said to Fyodor Vasilyevich, handing him the paper, fresh off the press and still smelling.

There was an announcement within a black border: ‘It is with profound sorrow that Praskovya Fyodorovna Golovina informs family and friends that her beloved husband, Ivan Ilyich Golovin, Member of the Court of

Justice, passed away on the 4th of February this year, 1882. The funeral will take place on Friday at 1 p.m.'

Ivan Ilyich had been a colleague of the gentlemen assembled there, and they had all liked him. He had been ill for several weeks, and the word was that his illness was incurable. His post had been kept open for him, but there was an understanding that in the event of his death Alexeyev would step into his place, and Alexeyev's place would be taken by either Vinnikov or Shtabel. So, the first thought that occurred to each of the assembled gentlemen on hearing the news of his death was how this death might affect his own prospects, and those of their acquaintances, for transfer or promotion.

'I'm sure to get Shtabel's job now, or Vinnikov's,' thought Fyodor Vasilyevich. 'They promised me ages ago, and a promotion like that would give me another eight hundred roubles a year, plus expenses.'

'I must apply to have my brother-in-law transferred from Kaluga,' thought Pyotr Ivanovich. 'My wife will be delighted. She won't be able to tell me I never do anything for her people.'

'I had a feeling he wasn't going to get better,' said Pyotr Ivanovich. 'It's sad.'

'What was actually wrong with him?'

'The doctors couldn't decide. Well, they could, but they all decided differently. The last time I saw him I thought he was going to come through it.'

'And I haven't been to see him since Christmas. I kept meaning to go.'

'Was he all right financially?'

'His wife had a bit of money, I think. Nothing very much.'

'Well, we'll have to go and see her. They live an awfully long way away.'

'For you they do. Where you live, everywhere's a long way away.'

'Look at that. He can't forgive me for living across the river,' said Pyotr Ivanovich, smiling at Shebek. The conversation turned to the long distances between the different parts of the city, and then they walked back into session.

Apart from the speculations aroused in each of them by this death, concerning the transfers and possible changes that this death might bring about, the very fact of the death of someone close to them aroused in all who heard about it, as always, a feeling of delight that he had died and they hadn't.

'There you have it. He's dead, and I'm not' was what everyone thought or felt. But his closest acquaintances, Ivan Ilyich's so-called friends, couldn't help thinking that they would now have to fulfil some tedious social obligations such as attending the funeral and calling on the widow to express their condolences.

Closest of all were Fyodor Vasilyevich and Pyotr Ivanovich.

Pyotr Ivanovich was an old friend from law school, and he felt indebted to Ivan Ilyich.

Over dinner he told his wife about the death of Ivan Ilyich and the mooted possibility of her brother being transferred to their district, and then, dispensing with his usual nap, he put on a dress-coat and set off for Ivan Ilyich's house.

At the entrance stood a carriage and two cabs. Downstairs in the entrance hall, next to the coat stand, a coffin lid with silk brocade, tassels and gold braid that had been powdered and polished stood propped against a wall. Two ladies in black were taking off their fur cloaks. He knew one of them, Ivan Ilyich's sister, but not the other. His colleague Schwartz was at the top of the stairs about to come down, but when he saw Pyotr Ivanovich he stopped and gave him a wink that seemed to say, 'Ivan Ilyich has messed things up – not what you or I would have done.'

Schwartz's face, with its English sidewhiskers and his lean figure in formal dress, exuded, as always, an air of elegant solemnity and, although the solemnity belied his playful personality, it was particularly poignant here, or so it seemed to Pyotr Ivanovich.

Pyotr Ivanovich allowed the ladies to pass on ahead, and slowly followed them upstairs. Instead of coming down, Schwartz stood waiting at the top. Pyotr Ivanovich knew why; he clearly wanted to arrange a game of whist somewhere that evening. The ladies proceeded upstairs

to see the widow, but Schwartz pursed his lips tightly with all seriousness, though his eyes had a mischievous look as he twitched his eyebrows, directing Pyotr Ivanovich off to the right and into the room where the dead man lay.

Pyotr Ivanovich entered the room, and hesitated, as people always do on these occasions, not knowing precisely what to do. The only thing he was certain of was that in this situation you couldn't go wrong if you made the sign of the cross. Whether or not you should bow at the same time he wasn't sure, so he went for a compromise, crossing himself as he walked in and giving a bit of a bow as he did so. At the same time, as far as hand and head movements permitted, he glanced round the room. Two young persons, nephews apparently, one of them a schoolboy, were crossing themselves as they left the room. A little old woman was standing there motionless. And a lady with curiously arched eyebrows was whispering to her. A church reader in a frock-coat – a hearty character of considerable spirit – was reading something out in a loud voice and a tone that brooked no contradiction. Gerasim, the peasant who waited at table, darted ahead of Pyotr Ivanovich, sprinkling something on the floor. Seeing this, Pyotr Ivanovich instantly recognized a slight smell of decaying flesh. When he had visited Ivan Ilyich for the last time he had seen this peasant in Ivan Ilyich's room, acting as a sick nurse, and Ivan Ilyich had had a special fondness for him.

Pyotr Ivanovich kept on crossing himself, and aimed a slight bow midway between the reader, the coffin and the icons on the corner table. Then, when the business of crossing himself seemed to be going on too long, he paused and took a close look at the dead man.

The dead man lay as all dead men lie, unusually heavy with his dead weight, with rigid limbs sinking into the soft lining of the coffin and his head bowed for eternity on the pillow, and he displayed what dead people always display, a waxen yellow forehead (with bald patches over his hollow temples) and a protruding nose that seemed to be pressing down hard on his upper lip. He had changed a good deal; he was even thinner than he had been when Pyotr Ivanovich had last seen him, but, as with all dead bodies, his face had acquired greater beauty, or, more to the point, greater significance, than it had had in life. Its expression seemed to say that what needed to be done had been done, and done properly. More than that, the expression contained a reproach, or at least a reminder, to the living. The reminder seemed out of place to Pyotr Ivanovich, or at least he felt it didn't apply to him personally. But an unpleasant feeling came over him, and he crossed himself again, hurriedly – too hurriedly, he thought, the haste was almost indecent – before turning and heading for the door.

Schwartz was waiting for him in the next room with his feet planted wide apart and both hands fiddling with the top hat held behind his back. One glance at his

mischievous, immaculately elegant figure and Pyotr Ivanovich felt restored. He could see that Schwartz was above all this, and would be impervious to anything that might have been depressing. His very appearance spoke volumes: in no way would the occasion of Ivan Ilyich's funeral serve as a reason for cancelling their usual session; in other words, nothing would prevent them from breaking open a new pack and riffing through the cards that evening while a servant set up four new candles. There was, in fact, no reason to think that this occasion should stop them having a good time that very evening. He said so in a low voice to Pyotr Ivanovich as he walked past, proposing that they meet for a game at Fyodor Vasilyevich's.

But Pyotr Ivanovich was clearly not destined to play whist that evening. Praskovya Fyodorovna, a short, plump woman whose body expanded from the shoulders down despite her best efforts to the contrary, done out in black, with a lace shawl over her head and the same curiously arched eyebrows as the lady facing the coffin, emerged from her chambers with some other ladies, showed them to the door of the dead man's room, and said, 'The service is about to begin. Do go in.'

Schwartz made an indeterminate bow, and stood there without accepting or rejecting this invitation. Praskovya, recognizing Pyotr Ivanovich, gave a sigh, went straight up to him, took him by the hand, and said, 'I know you were a good friend to Ivan Ilyich . . .' And she looked at

him, anticipating a suitable response. Pyotr Ivanovich knew that just as he had had to cross himself in there, out here it was necessary to squeeze her hand and say with a sigh, 'Believe me . . .' And that's what he did. Having done it, he felt that the desired effect had been achieved – he had been touched, and she had been touched.

'Let's go in before they get started. I must have a word with you,' said the widow. 'Give me your arm.'

Pyotr Ivanovich offered an arm and they made their way into the inner rooms, walking past Schwartz, who gave Pyotr Ivanovich a gloomy wink. 'No whist for you, then. You won't mind if we find another partner. We might make up a fivesome when you can get free,' said his mischievous glance.

Pyotr Ivanovich sighed even more deeply and plaintively, and Praskovya showed her gratitude by squeezing his hand. Proceeding into her drawing-room, which was done out in pink cretonne and lit by one dismal lamp, they sat down near to a table, she on a sofa, he on a low pouffe with broken springs that wobbled unevenly as he sat on it. Praskovya had wanted to warn him off into another chair, but a warning like that did not seem appropriate in the circumstances, so she thought better of it. As he sat down on his pouffe, Pyotr Ivanovich remembered the time when Ivan Ilyich had been decorating this room and had asked his advice about this pink cretonne with the green leaves. On her way past the table to sit

down on the sofa – the room was crammed with furniture and knick-knacks – Praskovya snagged the black lace of her black shawl on the carved edge of the table. Pyotr Ivanovich rose slightly to disentangle it, thus releasing the pouffe, which quivered and pushed up at him. The widow began disentangling the lace herself, so Pyotr Ivanovich sat down again, crushing the rebellious pouffe back into submission. But the widow had not finished disentangling herself, so Pyotr Ivanovich rose again, and so did the pouffe, rebellious and even creaking. When this was all over, she took out a clean cambric handkerchief and burst into tears. But Pyotr Ivanovich had cooled somewhat after the episode with the lace and the battle with the pouffe, and he sat there with a scowl on his face. The embarrassment was broken when Sokolov, Ivan Ilyich's footman, came in to report that the plot which Praskovya had chosen in the cemetery was going to cost two hundred roubles. She had stopped weeping, and she looked at Pyotr Ivanovich with a victimized air as she told him in French how hard things were for her. Pyotr Ivanovich made a silent gesture to acknowledge his absolute conviction that it could not be otherwise.

'Do smoke if you would like to,' she said in a tone of voice that was magnanimous yet flat with defeat, and she went on to discuss the cost of the plot with Sokolov. As he lit his cigarette, Pyotr Ivanovich heard that she had made detailed enquiries about the cost of various plots of land before settling on the one she wanted. That was