

# The Death of Ivan Ilych

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The Death of Ivan Ilych By LEO TOLSTOY Translated by Aylmer & Louise Maude 2014  
*The Death of Ivan Ilych* was originally published in 1886. Louise and Aylmer Maude's translation was first published in 1935 by Oxford University Press. Cover image: *L'Homme Endormi*, Carolus-Doran, 1861 Edition Copyright © 2015HythlodayPress. While the original work contained in this volume is in the public domain, the distinctive features of this edition may not be reproduced, displayed, modified, or distributed without the express prior written permission of the copyright holder. .

**Contents** [I](#) [II](#) [III](#) [IV](#) [V](#) [VI](#) [VII](#) [VIII](#) [IX](#) [X](#) [XI](#) [XII](#) I During an interval in the Melvinski trial in the large building of the Law Courts, the members and public prosecutor met in Ivan Egorovich Shebek's private room, where the conversation turned on the celebrated Krasovski case. Fyodor Vasilievich warmly maintained that it was not subject to their jurisdiction, Ivan Egorovich maintained the contrary, while Pyotr Ivanovich, not having entered into the discussion at the start, took no part in it but looked through the Gazette which had just been handed in. "Gentlemen," he said, "Ivan Ilych has died!" "You don't say so!" "Here, read it yourself," replied Pyotr Ivanovich, handing Fyodor Vasilievich the paper still damp from the press. Surrounded by a black border were the words: "Praskovya Fyodorovna Golovina, with profound sorrow, informs relatives and friends of the demise of her beloved husband Ivan Ilych Golovin, Member of the Court of Justice, which occurred on February the 4th of this year 1882. The funeral will take place on Friday at one o'clock in the afternoon." Ivan Ilych had been a colleague of the gentlemen present and was liked by them all. He had been ill for some weeks with an illness said to be incurable. His post had been kept open for him, but there had been conjectures that in case of his death Alexeev might receive his appointment, and that either Vinnikov or Shtabel would succeed Alexeev. So on receiving the news of Ivan Ilych's death the first thought of each of the gentlemen in that private room was of the changes and promotions it might occasion among themselves or their acquaintances. "I shall be sure to get Shtabel's place or Vinnikov's," thought Fyodor Vasilievich. "I was promised that long ago, and the promotion means an extra eight hundred rubles a year for me besides the allowance." "Now I must apply for my brother-in-law's transfer from Kaluga," thought Pyotr Ivanovich. "My wife will be very glad, and then she won't be able to say that I never do anything for her relations." "I thought he would never leave his bed again," said Pyotr Ivanovich aloud. "It's very sad." "But what really was the matter with him?" "The doctors couldn't say—at least they could, but each of them said something different. When last I saw him I thought he was getting better." "And I haven't been to see him since the holidays. I always meant to go." "Had he any property?" "I think his wife had a little—but something quiet trifling." "We shall have to go to see her, but they live so terribly far away." "Far away from you, you mean. Everything's far away from your place." "You see, he never can forgive my living on the other side of the river," said Pyotr Ivanovich, smiling at Shebek. Then, still talking of the distances between different parts of the city, they returned to the Court. Besides considerations as to the possible transfers and promotions likely to result from Ivan Ilych's death, the mere fact of the death of a near acquaintance aroused, as usual, in all who heard of it the complacent feeling that, "it is he who is dead and not I." Each one thought or felt, "Well, he's dead but I'm alive!" But the more intimate of Ivan Ilych's

acquaintances, his so-called friends, could not help thinking also that they would now have to fulfil the very tiresome demands of propriety by attending the funeral service and paying a visit of condolence to the widow. Fyodor Vasilievich and Pyotr Ivanovich had been his nearest acquaintances. Pyotr Ivanovich had studied law with Ivan Ilych and had considered himself to be under obligations to him. Having told his wife at dinner-time of Ivan Ilych's death, and of his conjecture that it might be possible to get her brother transferred to their circuit, Pyotr Ivanovich sacrificed his usual nap, put on his evening clothes and drove to Ivan Ilych's house. At the entrance stood a carriage and two cabs. Leaning against the wall in the hall downstairs near the cloakstand was a coffin-lid covered with cloth of gold, ornamented with gold cord and tassels, that had been polished up with metal powder. Two ladies in black were taking off their fur cloaks. Pyotr Ivanovich recognized one of them as Ivan Ilych's sister, but the other was a stranger to him. His colleague Schwartz was just coming downstairs, but on seeing Pyotr Ivanovich enter he stopped and winked at him, as if to say: "Ivan Ilych has made a mess of things—not like you and me." Schwartz's face with his Piccadilly whiskers, and his slim figure in evening dress, had as usual an air of elegant solemnity which contrasted with the playfulness of his character and had a special piquancy here, or so it seemed to Pyotr Ivanovich. Pyotr Ivanovich allowed the ladies to precede him and slowly followed them upstairs. Schwartz did not come down but remained where he was, and Pyotr Ivanovich understood that he wanted to arrange where they should play bridge that evening. The ladies went upstairs to the widow's room, and Schwartz with seriously compressed lips but a playful look in his eyes, indicated by a twist of his eyebrows the room to the right where the body lay. Pyotr Ivanovich, like everyone else on such occasions, entered feeling uncertain what he would have to do. All he knew was that at such times it is always safe to cross oneself. But he was not quite sure whether one should make obeisances while doing so. He therefore adopted a middle course. On entering the room he began crossing himself and made a slight movement resembling a bow. At the same time, as far as the motion of his head and arm allowed, he surveyed the room. Two young men—apparently nephews, one of whom was a high-school pupil—were leaving the room, crossing themselves as they did so. An old woman was standing motionless, and a lady with strangely arched eyebrows was saying something to her in a whisper. A vigorous, resolute Church Reader, in a frock-coat, was reading something in a loud voice with an expression that precluded any contradiction. The butler's assistant, Gerasim, stepping lightly in front of Pyotr Ivanovich, was strewing something on the floor. Noticing this, Pyotr Ivanovich was immediately aware of a faint odor of a decomposing body. The last time he had called on Ivan Ilych, Pyotr Ivanovich had seen Gerasim in the study. Ivan Ilych had been particularly fond of him and he was performing the duty of a sick nurse. Pyotr Ivanovich continued to make the sign of the cross slightly inclining his head in an intermediate direction between the coffin, the Reader, and the icons on the table in a corner of the room. Afterwards, when it seemed to him that this movement of his arm in crossing himself had gone on too long, he stopped and began to look at the corpse. The dead man lay, as dead men always lie, in a specially heavy way, his rigid limbs sunk in the soft cushions of the coffin, with the head forever bowed on the pillow. His yellow waxen brow with bald patches over his sunken temples was thrust up in the way peculiar to the dead, the protruding nose seeming to press on the upper lip. He was much changed and grown even thinner since Pyotr Ivanovich had last seen him, but, as is always the case with the dead, his face was handsomer and above all more dignified than when he was alive. The expression on the face said that what was necessary had been accomplished, and accomplished rightly. Besides this there was in that expression a reproach and a warning to the living. This warning seemed to Pyotr Ivanovich out of place, or at least not applicable to him. He felt a certain discomfort and so he hurriedly crossed himself once more and turned and went out of the door—too hurriedly and too regardless of propriety, as he himself was aware. Schwartz was waiting for him in the adjoining room with legs spread wide apart and both hands toying with his top-hat behind his back. The mere sight of that playful, well-groomed, and elegant figure refreshed Pyotr Ivanovich. He felt that Schwartz was above all these happenings and would not surrender to any depressing influences. His very look said that this incident of a church service for Ivan Ilych could not be a sufficient reason for infringing the order of the session—in other words, that it would certainly not prevent his unwrapping a new pack of cards and shuffling

them that evening while a footman placed fresh candles on the table: in fact, that there was no reason for supposing that this incident would hinder their spending the evening agreeably. Indeed he said this in a whisper as Pyotr Ivanovich passed him, proposing that they should meet for a game at Fyodor Vasilievich's. But apparently Pyotr Ivanovich was not destined to play bridge that evening. Praskovya Fyodorovna (a short, fat woman who despite all efforts to the contrary had continued to broaden steadily from her shoulders downwards and who had the same extraordinarily arched eyebrows as the lady who had been standing by the coffin), dressed all in black, her head covered with lace, came out of her own room with some other ladies, conducted them to the room where the dead body lay, and said: "The service will begin immediately. Please go in." Schwartz, making an indefinite bow, stood still, evidently neither accepting nor declining this invitation. Praskovya Fyodorovna recognizing Pyotr Ivanovich, sighed, went close up to him, took his hand, and said: "I know you were a true friend to Ivan Ilych..." and looked at him awaiting some suitable response. And Pyotr Ivanovich knew that, just as it had been the right thing to cross himself in that room, so what he had to do here was to press her hand, sigh, and say, "Believe me..." So he did all this and as he did it felt that the desired result had been achieved: that both he and she were touched. "Come with me. I want to speak to you before it begins," said the widow. "Give me your arm." Pyotr Ivanovich gave her his arm and they went to the inner rooms, passing Schwartz who winked at Pyotr Ivanovich compassionately. "That does for our bridge! Don't object if we find another player. Perhaps you can cut in when you do escape," said his playful look. Pyotr Ivanovich sighed still more deeply and despondently, and Praskovya Fyodorovna pressed his arm gratefully. When they reached the drawing-room, upholstered in pink cretonne and lighted by a dim lamp, they sat down at the table—she on a sofa and Pyotr Ivanovich on a low ottoman, the springs of which yielded spasmodically under his weight. Praskovya Fyodorovna had been on the point of warning him to take another seat, but felt that such a warning was out of keeping with her present condition and so changed her mind. As he sat down on the ottoman Pyotr Ivanovich recalled how Ivan Ilych had arranged this room and had consulted him regarding this pink cretonne with green leaves. The whole room was full of furniture and knick-knacks, and on her way to the sofa the lace of the widow's black shawl caught on the edge of the table. Pyotr Ivanovich rose to detach it, and the springs of the ottoman, relieved of his weight, rose also and gave him a push. The widow began detaching her shawl herself, and Pyotr Ivanovich again sat down, suppressing the rebellious springs of the ottoman under him. But the widow had not quite freed herself and Pyotr Ivanovich got up again, and again the ottoman rebelled and even creaked. When this was all over she took out a clean cambric handkerchief and began to weep. The episode with the shawl and the struggle with the ottoman had cooled Pyotr Ivanovich's emotions and he sat there with a sullen look on his face. This awkward situation was interrupted by Sokolov, Ivan Ilych's butler, who came to report that the plot in the cemetery that Praskovya Fyodorovna had chosen would cost two hundred rubles. She stopped weeping and, looking at Pyotr Ivanovich with the air of a victim, remarked in French that it was very hard for her. Pyotr Ivanovich made a silent gesture signifying his full conviction that it must indeed be so. "Please smoke," she said in a magnanimous yet crushed voice, and turned to discuss with Sokolov the price of the plot for the grave. Pyotr Ivanovich while lighting his cigarette heard her inquiring very circumstantially into the prices of different plots in the cemetery and finally decide which she would take. When that was done she gave instructions about engaging the choir. Sokolov then left the room. "I look after everything myself," she told Pyotr Ivanovich, shifting the albums that lay on the table; and noticing that the table was endangered by his cigarette-ash, she immediately passed him an ash-tray, saying as she did so: "I consider it an affectation to say that my grief prevents my attending to practical affairs. On the contrary, if anything can—I won't say console me, but—distract me, it is seeing to everything concerning him." She again took out her handkerchief as if preparing to cry, but suddenly, as if mastering her feeling, she shook herself and began to speak calmly. "But there is something I want to talk to you about." Pyotr Ivanovich bowed, keeping control of the springs of the ottoman, which immediately began quivering under him. "He suffered terribly the last few days." "Did he?" said Pyotr Ivanovich. "Oh, terribly! He screamed unceasingly, not for minutes but for hours. For the last three days he screamed incessantly. It was unendurable. I cannot

understand how I bore it; you could hear him three rooms off. Oh, what I have suffered!"

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Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910), author of *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*, was foremost among the great Russian novelists of the nineteenth century, and is widely considered one of the greatest writers of prose fiction in world history.

In his perceptive and moving depiction of Ivan Ilych, a worldly careerist facing his own mortality in the midst of a self-absorbed family and indifferent colleagues, Tolstoy provides one of literature's greatest and most memorable reflections on the meaning of the good life and on life as preparation for death.

This edition features the classic Oxford translation of Aylmer and Louise Maude, of whom Tolstoy himself said, "Better translators, both for knowledge of the two languages and for penetration into the very meaning of the matter translated, could not be invented."

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