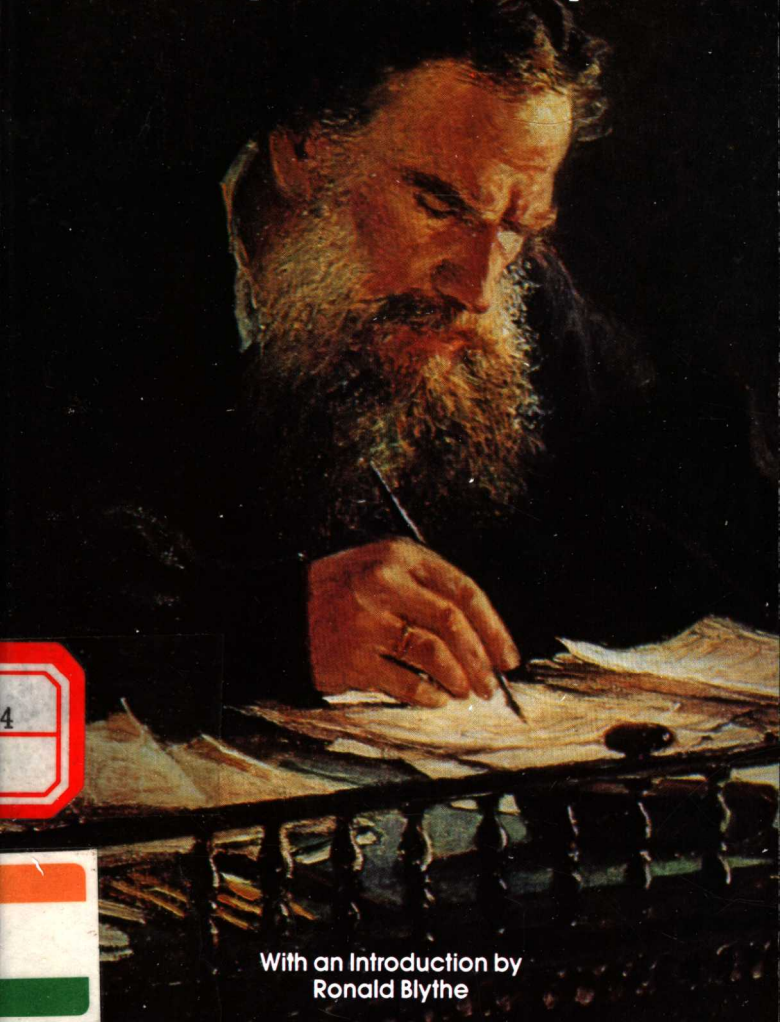




**CLASSIC • A BANTAM CLASSIC • A BANTAM CLASSIC • A BANTAM CLASSIC • A BANTAM CLASSIC • A BANTAM CLASSIC**

# The Death of Ivan Ilyich



**With an Introduction by  
Ronald Blythe**



BANTAM CLASSIC • A BANTAM CLASSIC • A BANTAM CLASSIC • A BANTAM CLASSIC • A BANTAM CLASSIC •

# The Death of Ivan Ilyich by Leo Tolstoy

Translated by Lynn Solotaroff

With an introduction by Ronald Blythe



BANTAM BOOKS

NEW YORK • TORONTO • LONDON • SYDNEY • AUCKLAND

THE DEATH OF MAN LYCH  
A Bantam Book  
Bantam Classic edition / June 1981

*All rights reserved.*

*Introduction copyright © 1981 by Ronald Blythe.*

*Translation copyright © 1981 by Bantam Books.*

*Cover painting by Nikolai Nikolayevich.*

*No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted  
in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical,  
including photocopying, recording, or by any information  
storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing  
from the publisher.*

*For information address: Bantam Books.*

*If you purchased this book without a cover you should be aware that  
this book is stolen property. It was reported as "unsold and destroyed"  
to the publisher and neither the author nor the publisher has received  
any payment for this "stripped book."*

ISBN 0-553-21035-1

*Published simultaneously in the United States and Canada*

---

Bantam Books are published by Bantam Books, a division of Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, Inc. Its trademark, consisting of the words "Bantam Books" and the portrayal of a rooster, is Registered in U.S. Patent and Trademark Office and in other countries. Marca Registrada. Bantam Books, 1540 Broadway, New York, New York 10036.

---

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

OPM 36 35 34 33

## Count Leo (Lev) Nikolaevich Tolstoy

displayed an extraordinary duality of character in a life filled with deep contradictions. He was born to an aristocratic Russian family on September 9, 1828. His parents died when he was young, and he was raised by several female relatives. In 1844, he entered the University of Kazan, remaining there only three years. At the age of 23, Tolstoy joined the Russian Army and fought in the Crimean War. While still in the service, his first published story appeared, a largely autobiographical work, called *Childhood* (1852). Tolstoy returned to his estate in 1861 and established a school for peasant children there. In 1862, he married Sofia Behrs and gradually abandoned his involvement with the school. The next fifteen years he devoted to managing the estate, raising his and Sofia's large family, and writing his two major works, *War and Peace* (1865–67) and *Anna Karenina* (1875–77).

During the latter part of this fifteen-year period, Tolstoy found himself growing increasingly disenchanted with the teachings of the Russian Orthodox Church. In the ensuing years, Tolstoy formulated for himself a new Christian ideal, the central creed of which involved nonresistance to evil; he also preached against the corrupt evil of the Russian state, of the need for ending all violence, and of the moral perfectibility of man. In practice, his asceticism required that he repudiate all vices, even forsaking physical contact with his own wife. In spite of these changes, he continued to write voluminously, primarily nonfiction, but also other works, such as the play *The Power of Darkness* (1886), the novella *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* (1886), and the novels *The Kreutzer Sonata* (1891) and *Resurrection* (1899).

In 1910, still unable to reconcile the differences in the lives led by the aristocracy and the simpler existence he craved, Tolstoy left the estate. He soon fell ill and was found dead on a cot in a remote railway station. He was buried on his estate at Yasnaya Polyana.

Bantam Classics

Ask your bookseller for classics by these international writers:

Aristophanes

Anton Chekhov

Euripides

Dante

Fyodor Dostoevsky

Alexandre Dumas

Gustave Flaubert

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

Victor Hugo

Henrik Ibsen

Franz Kafka

Gaston Leroux

Niccolo Machiavelli

Thomas Mann

Plato

Edmond Rostand

Sophocles

Leo Tolstoy

Ivan Turgenev

Jules Verne

Virgil

Voltaire

## Introduction

In *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* Tolstoy takes what was for him the tremendous imaginary leap of analyzing the reactions of a man who, until the surprising pain of his terminal illness began, had never given the inevitability of his own dying so much as a passing thought; a man who thus was as unlike Tolstoy as it was possible to be, for Tolstoy was a lifelong deathwatcher. He was, in fact, highly experienced in death and had compulsively observed it from a thousand angles both physically and metaphysically. He could not resist looking at it even when the sight terrified him. Ivan Ilyich, on the other hand, had taken no look and had made no search. Death had announced itself to him in a trivial fashion which, as a worldly careerist, he found idiotic and at first quite unbelievable. He had bumped himself slightly while hanging up draperies; how could such a thing spell annihilation? Was a young-middle-aged high court judge to be swept away by such a trifle? To the judge the notion is as unjust as it is absurd. However, dissolution starts, casually and even delicately at first, then ravenously. One critic of this little novel whose vast theme makes it a masterpiece of literary compression said that instead of descending into the dark places of the soul in this story, Tolstoy "descends with agonizing leisure

## INTRODUCTION

and precision into the dark places of the body. It is a poem—one of the most harrowing ever conceived—of the insurgent flesh, of the manner in which carnality, with its pains and corruptions, penetrates and dissolves the tenuous discipline of reason.”

In a chilling, plain language that has been shorn of most of the descriptive richness of his customary prose style, Tolstoy tells with bleak honesty what it is like to die when the mind is body-bound. He knew what being body-bound meant from his own strenuously earthy instincts, but at least he had developed a spirituality to put these instincts into some kind of focus. But what of a man whose existence had no focus? What happened to him when the little pain that wouldn't go away arrived? And so Tolstoy stares remorselessly through the orifices of the death mask of a man whose social and moral features have nothing whatever in common with his own, a conventional jack-in-office with blunted feelings and a sharp eye for the main chance. That such a person should preside over such a mighty thing as justice only adds to the irony. But we know his type; we see him everywhere still—on the company board as well as on the bench, in politics, advertising and, so far as he can manage it, always in the swim—a tenth-rate exerciser of power over others. Yet Tolstoy raises up this dull and rather despicable man until something about him shines sufficiently for the reader to catch a glimpse of himself reflected in him. He proves how, when it is almost eaten up by disease and frightful to contemplate, and

## INTRODUCTION

when pain is searching out the breaking point of the intellect, another factor, call it the soul or spirit or the true self, emerges.

The German physician and literary critic A. L. Vischér has investigated the parallel relationship that exists between a man's total personality and his relationship to death. "Simple, uncomplicated souls," he writes, "who do not attach such great importance to their own life, are able to accept their illness, because they accept their fate: life and heart have done their work, time for them to go. By contrast, successful and self-assured people are usually at a complete loss when faced with the reality of physical collapse." And he goes on to describe that popular and macabre theme of the Middle Ages when Death suddenly partners the living in a dance. The beautiful, the young, the important, the rich, the saintly, are each approached "spitefully, brutally, without warning" and are stopped in their tracks. "Today the concept of a blind fate is probably the dominant concept of the first half of life. A man who is in its grip will react by falling back on certain set formulae. He will speak of 'inscrutable ways,' of the 'cruel whims of fate,' i.e., of the all-powerful Moira (the idea of a preordained fate against which it was useless to struggle, and which dominated the death thinking of the ancient Greeks). Such people exist in a perpetual present, their unreflecting lives given over to one long round of activity . . . their unmistakable progress lacks a sense of time." Nearly all this applies to Ivan Ilyich, although Tolstoy's particular difficulty



## INTRODUCTION

was caused by his long being unable to accept that Death must partner him as it partnered all men. Just how would *he* behave when Death tapped him on the shoulder on some ordinary day when he was decorating a room, making a deal, or blotting a page? He cannot imagine how—it is altogether too impossible and horrible, and this in spite of his Christianity. And so he imagines it happening to a man he could never be—Ivan Ilyich, an opportunistic lawyer with starved emotions and crude vision. Gradually, as disease consumes him, the victim becomes Tolstoy's—and the reader's—spiritual brother and the equal of all humanity, the worst and the best.

*The Death of Ivan Ilyich* marked the close of Tolstoy's great crisis of faith, which preoccupied him for nearly the whole of the 1870s, and during which the thought that he must die harassed him almost to the point of insanity. The very rationality of death became for him the most irrational thing of all. He could not say, like Michelangelo: "If we have been pleased with life then we should not be displeased with death, since it comes from the hand of the same master," because his entire nature cried out against death as a fact. He felt he could not live if there was death. People have frequently complained of the manner in which death interrupts their work or play: Casanova on his deathbed resented being thrust out of life before the end of the show; and Simone de Beauvoir states that the reason why death fills us with anxiety is that it is the inescapable reversal of our projects. But

## INTRODUCTION

Tolstoy's anti-death mania went far beyond such thinking and led him into a labyrinth where, just when by means of some religious or philosophical trick he thought he had shaken off his pursuer, he would turn a corner and meet him face to face. Not Moira, the fate a man had to accept, but the fiend that had to be fought every inch of the way until breath stopped or the heart burst. Ivan Ilyich's terrible screaming resistance to death would have met the approval of Dylan Thomas, who urged his dying father to "rage, rage against the dying of the light," and it forms an unforgettable description of how Tolstoy thought he himself could behave in such a plight. Such resistance is rare. Although the dying are sad about losing out, they are also usually passive. The acceptance of death transforms death, writes Paul-Louis Landsberg in his *Essai sur l'Expérience de la Mort*, which is something neither Tolstoy nor Ivan Ilyich could accept. Both Tolstoy, during the 1870s, and his pathetic hero were like naked victims impotently at the mercy of a fate which their entire instincts fought and denied. Tolstoy, for whom everything that ever happened to him was grist to his literary mill, had to examine this denial of death.

He found a way of doing so after hearing about the death of a provincial judge named Ivan Ilyich Mechnikov. The death had been described to him in some detail by the judge's brother. Mechnikov had presided at the court at Tula, a town near the Tolstoy estate and from whose railway station the writer often watched the victims of Tula justice set out in chains and with

## INTRODUCTION

shaved heads for Siberia. Count Tolstoy, burning with a Christ-like identification with these poor outcasts, many of them young boys and aged men, had imagined the kind of professional detachment that made it possible for officials like Mechnikov to treat their fellow creatures so inhumanely and then return to dinner with their families and friends. Comforting the prisoners at Tula station, Tolstoy had been amazed by the triviality of their offenses: "One hundred and fourteen persons sent away for failure to possess a passport . . . Two accused of nothing; they're just being deported . . . Two convicts sentenced to hard labor for life, for brawling and manslaughter . . . they were crying. A pleasing face. Appalling stench . . ." he noted. Then suddenly, perhaps one ordinary morning when he was running through the list for the day, Mechnikov himself had been sentenced to the ultimate dark and to the cold—he who had so unfeelingly and for so long doled out death or a half-life to others. What happened inside Mechnikov from then on? At first Tolstoy thought he would set out the effects of this terminal illness in the shape of a diary entitled "The Death of a Judge"; then he changed his mind. His own death fears had to be incorporated in this book, because the chief reason why we can tolerate death in others, even in those near to us, is that it pushes it away from ourselves. In this story Tolstoy would join a man in his death to the limits of his literary power. "Take the saving lie from the average man and you take his happiness away," said Ibsen. The

## INTRODUCTION

biggest saving lie is to accept a friend's death and not one's own.

Tolstoy was highly experienced in death, and from childhood onward his diaries, letters, and books reveal how much it intrigued him. His death "notes" range from the detailed studies he made of slaughter on the battlefield to an execution in Paris, from the animallike acceptance of death by the muzhiks on his estates to the greatly varying reactions he had to the many deaths in his own family. These, as was customary at all times until our own, included the frequent deaths of children. Sometimes he showed uncontrollable grief over the death of one of his little boys, sometimes almost a callousness, as though he was keeping death in its place. He was fascinated to discover that death annoyed him as much as it saddened him, and in the *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* there is a lot of plain, ordinary irritation floating around. Neither the dying man nor those attending him have any time for death, and they are vexed when they are forced to give it their full attention.

Tolstoy was remembering how put out he had been when his brother Dmitry died and how, in his youthful defiance of the etiquette of bereavement, he had behaved very badly. Yet he had not been able to stop himself. When he had come to his brother's sickroom and seen this terrible object with "his enormous wrist as though soldered to the bones of his forearm," he felt that what he was seeing was no more than a miserable, useless part of himself, and so he

## INTRODUCTION

freed himself from it with what he considered then was a natural revulsion. This brother's life, brief though it was, had been Tolstoy's spiritual journey in reverse. First of all Dmitry had been extravagantly chaste and pure, and then, at twenty-six, he had plunged into debauchery. So total had been his sensuality, in fact, that, rather like Genet, he had transformed it into a sacrament. Tolstoy, staring at him before he hurried away, saw that "his face had been devoured by his eyes." Later, picking away at his motives for deserting his brother, he writes: "I felt sorry for Mitya (Dmitry) but not very. . . . I honestly believe that what bothered me most about his death was that it prevented me from attending a performance at Court to which I had been invited." In Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* a young man is furious when a play he is about to take part in is canceled because of the death of a grandmother, and in Proust's novel, the Duc de Guermantes pretends that news of a death hasn't reached him so that he can attend a party. Mourning customs in the West have been reduced to the minimum in order that "life may go on." Religious people will talk glibly of their belief in resurrection to excuse this disregard, but as Paul Tournier, a real Christian, observes: "Resurrection does not do away with death. It follows it. I cannot minimize death because I believe in resurrection."

With all but two exceptions, those surrounding Ivan Ilyich at his end feel sorry for him, "but not very." Sorrow is a formality and he himself knows it. Nearly everything in his

## INTRODUCTION

life has been a formality—his outlook, his marriage, his work, and his hopes—and he is hurt but not surprised by the conventional reaction to his tragedy. When his colleagues first heard the news, “the death of a close acquaintance evoked in them all the usual feeling of relief that it was someone else, not they, who had died. ‘Well, isn’t that something—he’s dead, but I’m not.’” And then the tedious demands of propriety, as Tolstoy calls them, have to be obeyed, and all the familiar protective rituals set in motion, not so much for the dear departed as for the safety of his friends. Have they not been grimly dragged away from food and money, cards and conversation, power and ambition, to the dull house of the dead? No small part of Ivan Ilyich’s suffering is caused by his understanding of all this. He knows, for instance, that he is no longer the head of the house but an obstacle to his family, “and that his wife had adopted a certain attitude toward his illness and clung to it regardless of what he said or did.” In one of the novel’s poignant moments, the sheer desolating aloneness of dying is evoked when, “after supper his friends went home, leaving Ivan Ilyich alone with the knowledge that his life had been poisoned and was poisoning the life of others. . . . He had to go on living like this, on the brink of disaster, without a single person to understand and pity him.”

It is death as it is watched by the dying that Tolstoy probes here. Death as it is glimpsed by the healthy or imaginatively understood by the artistic is not his theme. Neither is it death as

## INTRODUCTION

seen by doctors, for these he despises. What he concentrates on is the plight of a man who has a coldly adequate language for dealing with another's death but who remains incoherent when it comes to his own. When death actually begins to happen, when one has to say, like Ivan Ilyich, that "it's not a question of a caecum or a kidney, but of life and . . . death. Yes, life was there and now it's going, going . . ."—what then? What words? What useful clichés even? What soothing talk about us all having to go sometime? That remarkable though neglected novelist John Cowper Powys once gave the bitter answer in these words:

"He it is who—and make no mistake, my friend, the poor devil is yourself—who now, very now, visualizes the inflamed condition of his prostate gland in the curves of the pattern on his lavatory floor. There is the appalling possibility that the 'I' upon whom this whole world of intimate impressions depends will soon have to face its absolute *annihilation*. The sun will rise as before, and the winds will blow as before. People will talk of the weather in the same tone. The postman will knock as he did just now and the letters will fall on the mat. But *he* won't be there. He, our pivot and the center of everything, will be nowhere at all." In *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* Tolstoy puts the same realization thus: "Yes, life was there and now it's going, going, and I can't hold on to it. Yes. Why deceive myself? Isn't it clear to everyone but me that I'm dying, that it's only a question of weeks, days—perhaps minutes? Before there was light,

## INTRODUCTION

now there is darkness. Before I was here, now I am going there. Where?' He broke out in a cold sweat, his breathing died down. All he could hear was the beating of his heart. 'I'll be gone. What will there be then? Nothing. So where will I be when I'm gone?'"

Maurice Maeterlinck, the Belgian poet who was born a generation later than Tolstoy and who lived long enough to see the holocaust of both world wars, often attacked the convention by which we allow a whole range of expressions for dealing with the deaths of strangers, neighbors, friends, parents—even our children and lovers—but almost none at all for the death which must come to ourselves. When Ivan Ilyich realized that he was lost, that there was no return, "that the end had come, the very end," he didn't use words at all but began three days of incessant screaming. He screamed with an "O" sound, writes Tolstoy. It reminds us of Edvard Munch's famous work "The Scream," painted in 1893, and which has been described as a John-the-Baptist-like cry to an unprepared world, to unmindful minds. The totally alone figures in the paintings of Francis Bacon also echo this solitary noise which is both protest and prophecy.

Earlier in his mortal illness Ivan Ilyich had "cried about his helplessness, about his terrible loneliness, about the cruelty of people, about the cruelty of God, about the absence of God," about once articulate concepts and ideas which were now letting him down. Although bitter and indignant, like a little boy in his tears and rage,



## INTRODUCTION

he yet retained the belief that one or all of these temporarily unkind forces would stop hounding him, that they would even show him their benign side and comfort him and kiss him better. The nightmare would pass because, up until now, nightmares had always passed. Then there returns the plain black fact: He is dying. Ironically, he can only attract the attention of his friends and of his God by acknowledging this. But acknowledgment is horrifying, and thus the adult screaming, the most dreadful of all sounds.

Maeterlinck was amazed by the crudeness of Western man's thought when it came to the subject of his own death. The fatuity and shallowness of man's philosophy appalled him. "We deliver death into the dim hands of instinct," he writes in *La Morte*, "and we grant it not one hour of our intelligence. Is it surprising that the idea of death, which should be the most perfect and the most luminous, remains the flimsiest of our ideas and the only one that is backward? How should we know the one power we never look in the face? To fathom its abysses we wait until the most enfeebled, the most disordered moments of our life arrive." Ivan Ilyich certainly does this, and Tolstoy even goes so far as to create in the dying judge a hint of actual frustration when, his screaming done and his hour come, it occurs to him that now he won't have time to explore the fascinatingly interesting and no longer hideous territory of his own death. Yet only an hour before this intellectual peace descends, Ivan Ilyich is experiencing the peak of terror as he finds himself in the conflict of