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The Death of Ivan Ilyitch

Leo Tolstoy (1828 – 1910) Translated by Constance Garnett

Read by: Laurie Anne Walden Language: English
 Length: 2 hours 32 minutes Style: Solo
 Genre(s): Fiction, Short Fiction

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The Death of Ivan Ilyitch is a novella by Leo Tolstoy written not long after his religious awakening in the late 1870's and first published in 1886. It is considered one of the masterpieces of his late fiction and one of the best examples of the novella form. Ivan Ilyitch is an ambitious and highly regarded official of the Court of Justice described as “an intelligent, polished, lively and agreeable man”. His wife is described as self-absorbed and unsympathetic to her husband, who finds her too demanding and seeks refuge in his work as his family life becomes unfulfilling. He falls accidentally one day, injuring his side, and slowly begins to suffer from an increasing pain. He becomes irritable and finally visits a physician, who cannot pinpoint the problem. He tries every remedy he can to no avail. The pain forces him to stop working and take to his bed, where he begins a long and winding meditation as he grapples with his fate and its meanings. He comes to hate his family, who offer little solace, pretending he is only sick, not dying. Only his young peasant servant offers sympathy and genuine compassion. He comes to see his life as artificial, self-centered and devoid of much true connection, in contrast to the authentic life of his servant. In his last days he feels “some force” strike him and is brought into a bright light. His hate for his family turns to pity, his fear of death departs, and somehow even death itself disappears.

Leo Tolstoy (September 9, 1828 – November 20, 1910) was born to a noble Russian family. Raised by relatives after his parents died when he was a still a boy, he was wealthy and free to live the dissolute life of a young man of society in Moscow and St. Petersburg. After gambling away a small fortune he left for the Caucasus to fight in the Crimean War. There, Tolstoy, a failed student without evident promise, began to write. After completing several brilliant shorter works, he married and settled down at his family’s estate, Yasnaya Polyana, and began his masterpiece, War and Peace.

Tolstoy led a life with as broad an intellectual, philosophical and spiritual horizon as the vast spaces of his books, a life that indentured itself to the land and the deep down physical realities of manual labor. Deemed a genius from his first published works, Tolstoy’s growth as a novelist might be less interesting than his long, fevered and ultimately painful spiritual growth from dissolute young man to the spiritual anarchist of his latter days, who attempted to live in literal compliance with Christ’s Sermon on the Mount. His marriage, which had begun in sunlight and favor, dissolved in bitterness and recriminations. At age 82 and in poor health, he left Yasnaya Polyana, only to die from pneumonia in a railway station. Leo Tolstoy was a giant among men whose person encompassed an entire spectrum. He was irascible and kind, brilliant and stubborn, a glutton and an ascetic, spiritual but of the earth. His influence on writers as well as social activists like Ghandi and Martin Luther King remains immeasurable.