

**THE NOVELS AND OTHER
WORKS OF LYOF N.
TOLSTOÏ. THE DEATH OF IVAN
ILYITCH AND OTHER STORIES**

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The novels and other works of Lyof N. Tolstoï. The death of Ivan Ilyitch and other stories by Lyof N. Tolstoï

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INTRODUCTION

THE stories here presented are interesting not only in themselves, but also by reason of the variety in style and subject characterizing them. The "Death of Ivan Ilyitch" is a somber and powerful picture of the insidious progress of a fatal disease as well as a study in religious philosophy. No one can read Count Tolstoy's writings without being struck by the insistent emphasis put on the fact of death. It threatens and hangs over all men, of course; if there is any one thing which is taken for granted, it is that we all must die. But the average man is fortunately as oblivious of this inevitable approach as he is of the action of his vital organs. But with Count Tolstoy the dread of death seems to have been a mighty reality, and he has paused again and again to paint in the most agonizing detail the fatal divorce of life. In his war pictures this is to be expected; but we have death-bed scenes such as that of the old Count Bezukhoj, that of Prince Andrej, that of Nikolaj Levin, and this painful and morbid study of Ivan Ilyitch's lonely and pathetic passage through the Valley of the Shadow. Then in contrast with this comes the story entitled "Three Deaths," where the same tragedy is enacted by a woman of rank, by a rude peasant, and — with a touch of genius — by a tree. Several chapters of Count Tolstoy's treatise on "Life" are devoted to an analysis of the fear of death, and it is evident that he has to a large extent conquered, by his later philosophy, the passionate dread which he confesses hung like a pall over his life.

The short stories which follow were written as tracts for the people, and were in many cases, when published in their separate form, illustrated with quaint woodcuts.

They represent the latest phase in the author's views — an evolution which it is easy to trace from Olyenin in "The Cossacks," through Pierre Bezukhoï in "War and Peace," and Levin in "Anna Karenina," up to the idealized muzhik who earns his bread in the sweat of his brow, does good for evil, makes no resistance to violence, and comes out victorious over every temptation of the grotesque and comical devil and his imps. This form of composition was very likely suggested to Count Tolstoï by the popular tales that have been in vogue in Russia for three or four hundred years.

Such, for example, is the fifteenth-century "Story of Vasarga the Merchant," in which the child Mudro-muisl, or Wise Thought, solves the riddles of the wicked Tsar Nesmian. This *grim* but dull-minded tyrant treats Dmitri Vasarga hospitably; but when the guest, in reply to his question, "What is thy religion?" doughtily replies, "I am of the Christian religion, of the city of Kief, the little merchant Dmitri; and I believe in one God, — Father, Son, and Holy Ghost," he is given one of these choices: to adopt the false religion of the grim tsar, and have great honor; to solve three riddles, or, if he fail to solve the riddles, and still stand firm, to go to prison and starve to death. Mudro-muisl saves his father's wealth and health. He puts the tyrant to shame, is *elected to the throne by a vote of the people*, who were Christian at heart in spite of their tsar, and, having released from the noisome dungeon the three hundred and thirty starving merchants who had been true to their faith, he establishes free trade, and becomes a prosperous and admirable prince, — a most suggestive and inspiring story for any nation which had lurking desires for democracy. Its moral is simply this: that the ruler of a country, even though he be fortified on the throne with wealth and power, is, nevertheless, at the mercy of a little child who has the wit to control and utilize the sentiment of the whole people.

The story of Vasarga is four centuries old, and Russia has not even a constitution. Will Count Tolstoï's theories of non-resistance and communism, of the bless-

ings of poverty and service, be in practice four hundred years hence?

These stories will be regarded both seriously and as curiosities, for it is impossible not to read between the lines. The only wonder is that the censor who forbade "My Religion" should have allowed the *skazka* entitled "Ivan the Fool." The implication of criticism on the whole military system of Russia is not even covert. The question of regicide is plainly discussed in "A Candle." Though regicide itself is condemned, it is not dubious who is meant by the "overseer" of the story. Count Tolstol's whole system of philosophy is concretely revealed in these allegories; it is not necessary here to discuss the strength or weakness of his logic. But there are few who will not be touched by the moral which Count Tolstol conveys by means of these quaint and curious tales. And there can be no doubt that such a story as "Where Love is there God is also" is a masterpiece of exquisite beauty, certain to achieve immortality.

The style of the original Russian is staccato, abrupt, even crabbed. Connective conjunctions are frequently omitted, and there seems to be a deliberate mixture of tenses, past and present. No attempt has been made to reproduce these peculiarities in English; though the simplicity, which is one of the charms of the folk-tale and of these, is legitimately preserved.

