

OVERBOARD

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Herbert Clyde Lewis

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PREFACE

Overboard emerged from a removal box that was sent to us by a catholic monastery. It contained five small green enamel ashtrays and a number of books, left by a distant uncle who lived and died in the seclusion of an institution for the mentally impaired. The torn cover bore the faded stamp of a library in Hawaii. I read it without interruption from cover to cover and was impressed by the austere language, the strong images and the universal scope of the haunting story. There was no doubt in my mind that *Overboard* belongs in the same gallery of honor where *The death of Ivan Iyich* by Leo Tolstoy and *The Gentleman from San Francisco* by Ivan Bunin have found a resting place.

A search for the writer revealed that he was born in New York in 1909 as the son of Russian immigrants. He had a newspaper career as a reporter for the *Shanghai Evening Post* and *China Press* and quit his job at the *New York Journal* to

work as an independent writer. When his first novel *Gentleman overboard* was published in 1937, Lewis was forced to declare bankruptcy. He moved to Hollywood, became a successful scriptwriter and worked as an editor for *Time magazine*. Lewis wrote three more novels, *Spring Offensive* (1940), *Season's greetings* (1941) and *Silver dark* (posthumous, 1959). He died of a heart attack in 1950, leaving behind a wife and two children.

Overboard has been wrongly considered a comedy. It received due critical acclaim – *Time magazine* presented it as ‘a hair-raising little tour de force’ – and Lewis’s black humor was much appreciated. That the story was in the first place an existentialist masterpiece, concentrating on an acting, feeling individual who has made choices in life and faces the irrevocable consequences in the hour of his death, went largely unnoticed.

Let me briefly summarize our three beautiful stories about death and invite you, reader, to decide for yourself if there is reason to put a flower on Herbert Clyde Lewis’s forgotten grave and resurrect his spiritual remains.

The Death of Ivan Ilyich (1886) tells us the story of a high-court judge in 19th-century

Russia and his sufferings and death from a terminal illness. In the final moments of his life, Ivan realizes that a man can live in two ways, and that whichever we choose will ultimately determine our attitude toward death. The self-centered life that he himself has led up to that moment makes him cling to individual survival and creates an insurmountable fear of death. By contrast, his caretaker Gerasim makes his own interests subordinate to those of others, his is a life of empathy, compassion and sacrifice. As Gerasim so discounts his own individuality, the destructive power of death is discounted as well. This insight brings instant relief. For the first time since his illness, Ivan puts himself in the desolate position of his wife and children, his fear disappears and he longs for a quick end.

In *The Gentleman from San Francisco* (1915) Bunin introduces us to a 58-year-old American millionaire from San Francisco who has acquired a great fortune and sets off with his wife and daughter on a grand tour. A luxurious cruise ship first brings them to Naples, where the gentleman is dismayed by the unusually bad winter weather and finds that the city does not meet his expectations. They go on to Capri, where he

dies in a hotel room. The end is abrupt, leaving him no time to oversee his life. Thus the pampered gentleman of San Francisco, who had traveled on the first-class deck in every conceivable comfort, returns home in a coffin in the dark, pounding hold, while dining and dancing goes on above his head and the ship continues its service unperturbed.

In *Overboard* (1937) we meet Henry Preston Standish, partner in the stock brokerage of his wife's family, a promising young man with a handsome, dedicated wife, two children and a large apartment in New York City. When he gets sudden anxiety attacks, Standish decides to dispel the routine by making a cruise to Hawaii. He thoroughly enjoys the freedom, the sunsets over the ocean and the social life on board the ship. On the return trip he slips and falls overboard. In his lonely struggle in the water we are made familiar with his life and personality. Standish oversees his existence with the honesty that the situation imposes. Above all he deeply regrets a lack of appreciation for the good things that his life had to offer him.

Tolstoy's story is probably the most philosophical of the three. With all the uplifting

qualities of the relatively happy ending, it also has a flaw. Ivan Ilyich's transition from one attitude to another occurs as a *Deus ex machina*; emotional development or realistic events cannot sufficiently explain it. Lewis had an easier job, as his leading character does not have to make a u-turn. His death crushes a man who remains his unchanged self and perishes without redemption. Lewis shares with Tolstoy a great sense of pace as well as a subtle humor. Tolstoy restrains the latter, with the effect that the story gradually gets heavier. Lewis keeps it up. His light-footed tone and a sharp eye for the absurd create a breathtaking contrast with the approaching demise and the growing isolation of the protagonist.

Lewis published his story twenty-two years after Bunin. It is not unlikely that he has read *The gentleman of San Francisco* and wrote *Overboard* in response. Both use a cruise and there is a similarity in the title, Lewis's being originally *Gentleman overboard*. Where Bunin's ship stands for a reprehensible way of life, for Lewis it represents just life itself. Bunin has created some of the best characters of world literature, the choice for a conceptual approach

that does not focus on a character but on a thought can only have been a considered one. Lewis chose to concentrate on flesh and blood. All the psychological phases of disbelief, extinguishing hope, panic, loneliness, melancholy and regret are well worked out and leave a poignant aftertaste.

It is not easy to coincide with Ivan Ilyich, who until just before the end exhibits the self-centered behavior imposed on him by the story. Bunin also uses his protagonist to condemn a way of life. If even his creator does not like the gentleman, how should we identify? Standish by contrast, we are allowed to like. His kind of life and his mistakes are familiar to us. We float with him in the water, see the ship sail away from us and share his deep regret. Apart from the other properties that make Lewis's story survive a comparison with the best and the greatest, it offers its own comfort. Not the comfort of clear insight, transcendence or redemption, but of shared loneliness and the power of humor.

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Amsterdam, August 2, 2019

