IVAN ALEKSANDROVICH GONCHAROV

OBLOMOV

Ivan Aleksandrovich Goncharov

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Enriched edition.

Introduction, Studies and Commentaries by Tessa Caldwell

EAN 8596547251422

Edited and published by DigiCat, 2022

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Introduction

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Between the quickening current of a world that urges action and the placid eddy of a soul that longs for perfect rest, Oblomov explores how comfort, habit, and hesitation can harden into destiny while affection, duty, and friendship press against that stillness, offering a portrait of a gentle man who cannot move and a society that cannot wait, the friction between inner ease and outer demand producing comedy without cruelty and pathos without melodrama, and inviting readers to consider whether avoiding discomfort is a harmless preference or the quiet surrender of a life.

Ivan Aleksandrovich Goncharov’s Oblomov is a cornerstone of nineteenth-century Russian realism, first published in 1859 and set largely in St. Petersburg and on a provincial estate. The novel unfolds within drawing rooms, boarding houses, and bureaucratic corridors, portraying a society stratified by rank and sustained by routine. Its realism is tempered by a humane irony that refuses caricature even as it scrutinizes idleness, privilege, and the habits of the landowning class. Written in the mid-century atmosphere of accelerating change, the book studies the friction between personal temperament and social expectation without resorting to polemic, letting ordinary scenes reveal the pressures of history.

The premise is disarmingly simple: Ilya Ilyich Oblomov, a mild, educated landowner, receives pressing news about his estate but cannot bring himself to leave his St. Petersburg

rooms, where a loyal, exasperating servant and a carousel of visitors complicate every intention. Across these delays moves Andrei Stolz, an energetic friend whose brisk clarity contrasts with Oblomov’s dreamy caution. The narration is steady, observant, and gently ironic; scenes linger over gestures, furnishings, and pauses, building humor that slides into tenderness. The pace is deliberate by design, so that the reader feels the weight of postponement and the fragility of resolve.

At its center lies an inquiry into inertia: not merely laziness, but the way fear of loss, attachment to comfort, and the wish to avoid moral compromise can immobilize a person. The novel examines habit as a shelter and a trap, time as both balm and solvent, and responsibility as something simultaneously desired and dreaded. It shows how privilege can dull urgency even as it imposes obligations, and how tenderness may coexist with evasion. Without turning programmatic, the book creates a nuanced map of temperament, asking what we owe to others, what we owe to ourselves, and when rest becomes renunciation.

Goncharov populates the novel with figures who illuminate the spectrum between activity and repose: officious functionaries who thrive on paperwork, amiable idlers who confuse gossip with life, bustling men of affairs, and loyal dependents whose patience both enables and tests their masters. St. Petersburg’s rooms and streets are described with tactile specificity, from rumpled robes to ink-stained desks, so domestic minutiae become moral weather. The satire is gentle but pointed, exposing the rituals that protect complacency and the talk that substitutes for action.

Against this background, the quiet persistence of friendship gives the story ballast and a counterrhythm to delay.

For contemporary readers, Oblomov resonates as a study of procrastination, burnout, and the lure of frictionless comfort. In an age that alternates between relentless productivity and self-protective retreat, the novel’s patient attention to motives and self-justifications feels uncannily current. It shows how minor postponements ripple into altered futures, how kindness can shade into avoidance, and how systems reward both speed and stasis. Without diagnosing its hero in modern terms, the book treats his indecision with compassion, encouraging readers to examine their own negotiations with time, obligation, and rest—and to ask whether the life they are preserving is the one they mean to live.

Reading Oblomov is less a sprint through plot than an immersion in atmosphere, temperament, and moral weather, a deliberate pace that mirrors its subject and yields steadily deepening clarity. The narrative voice balances sympathy with scrutiny, inviting readers to care for its characters while reflecting on the choices they elude. As a novel of character and conscience, it offers the enduring pleasure of precise observation and the bracing challenge of self-recognition. Approached with patience, it reveals not only a vivid portrait of mid-century Russia but also a quietly radical question: what, after all, counts as a well-spent day, or life?

Synopsis

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Ivan Aleksandrovich Goncharov’s Oblomov portrays a St. Petersburg landowner whose days unfold in a small apartment, amid unopened letters and postponed decisions. Ilya Ilyich Oblomov, gentle and intelligent yet chronically inactive, lives with his loyal, grumbling servant Zakhar, fending off creditors, visitors, and any call to action. The opening movement sets a measured pace, letting readers observe how convenience and fear of complication smother resolve. Through ordinary interruptions—a landlord’s demands, messages from his distant estate, friendly invitations—the novel establishes its central tension: the gap between Oblomov’s humane ideals and his inability to translate intent into sustained, practical effort.

As acquaintances pass through his rooms, the social world of mid-nineteenth-century Petersburg presses in. Letters warn that his country estate is poorly managed and requires decisive oversight. Friends urge him to move, to respond, to reenter society; he promises to act, draws up plans, and lets them lapse. The comedy of delay shades into quiet anxiety as obligations accumulate. Goncharov keeps the stakes domestic and administrative, emphasizing how passive negligence can harm people and property far away. Into this impasse returns Andrei Stolz, Oblomov’s energetic childhood friend, who embodies a contrasting ethic of discipline, mobility, and practical responsibility.

A pivotal interlude traces the hero’s formation. In scenes of childhood remembered, the provincial estate of Oblomovka appears as a realm of warmth, indulgence, and unhurried routine. Meals, naps, and solicitous caretaking shape a boy who is protected from exertion and shielded from conflict. The portrait is affectionate yet diagnostic: the comforts of a patriarchal household, supported by serf labor, create a temperament that dreads disruption and idealizes repose. This background clarifies why Oblomov’s conscience never hardens into habits of action, and why any request—however reasonable—feels like a threat to an inner vision of safety and harmony.

Stolz’s arrival brings a different rhythm. Practical, cosmopolitan, and affectionate, he refuses to accept his friend’s paralysis as destiny. He prods Oblomov to sort affairs, drafts plans to secure the estate, and insists on healthier routines. New surroundings are arranged to limit distractions and break dependent patterns. Their conversations articulate competing models of life: one anchored in introspection and moral sensibility, the other in work, travel, and incremental reform. Stolz seeks not to conquer but to awaken, trusting that consistent structure can turn good intentions into action. For a time, momentum builds, and the circle of acquaintances widens.

Within that enlarged circle appears Olga Ilyinskaya, whose intelligence and taste appeal to Oblomov’s better self. Drawn to his sincerity and capacity for feeling, she sets out—gently but purposefully—to call forth latent strength. Walks, reading, and music become occasions for shared aspiration, and Oblomov experiences an inward quickening

that challenges his reliance on ease. Yet the relationship exposes fault lines: fear of responsibility, unease with public expectations, and the allure of retreat when choices demand firmness. Olga, advised by friends and watched by Stolz, must weigh the difference between inspiring change and assuming the burden of another’s unfinished growth.

Countercurrents complicate this fragile progress. Old acquaintances exploit Oblomov’s trust, legal matters tangle, and household economies grow opaque. A move to quieter lodgings under the care of a kind widow offers restorative calm, home cooking, and undemanding affection. The atmosphere, soothing and sincere, also risks reestablishing the very habits he struggles to outgrow. Small comforts accumulate while letters go unanswered and accounts remain unsettled. Stolz continues to intervene, but Goncharov refuses simple moral arithmetic, exploring the ethics of care, dependence, and duty. The narrative edges toward decisive choices that will align affection, property, and self-respect—or let them drift apart.

Goncharov’s study of character crystallized a lasting term—oblomovshchina—for the cultural syndrome of paralyzing inertia masked as gentleness. Without sensational turns, the novel tests whether sympathy, friendship, and love can counter a social order that rewards comfort and evasion. Its contrasts between city and province, progress and stasis, and personal feeling and institutional change parallel wider debates in nineteenth-century Russia. The prose balances irony with compassion, granting every figure recognizable motives. By tracing the costs of postponement alongside the dignity of aspiration, Oblomov remains a touchstone for

reflecting on responsibility, modernization, and the lived tension between intention and deed.

Historical Context

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Ivan Goncharov’s Oblomov appeared in 1859, on the eve of the Great Reforms of Alexander II. Its action centers on St. Petersburg, then the imperial capital, and glances back to the Russian countryside of landed estates. The empire’s institutions framed daily life: autocratic monarchy, the Orthodox Church’s cultural authority, and the Table of Ranks regulating civil service careers. Serfdom still dominated agrarian relations, tying peasants to noble landowners through labor obligations or money dues. In this late-Nicholas I and early-Alexander II atmosphere, the norms of rank, service, and estate income shaped expectations for educated nobles, providing the social coordinates within which Goncharov’s characters move.

St. Petersburg in the 1840s–1850s was a bureaucratic city of ministries, chanceries, and apartment houses. The civil servant (chinovnik) navigated a world of petitions, reports, and promotion through patronage. The Table of Ranks, created by Peter the Great, continued to organize status and advancement, while salons and clubs connected officials, writers, and landowners. Alongside this urban culture stood provincial estates run by stewards and serfs, often at a distance from proprietors who preferred the capital. Domestic service, carriage hire, and the rhythm of official hours formed a recognizable routine, one that literature repeatedly portrayed as both orderly and enervating.

The novel emerged from an intellectual climate marked by sharp debates between Westernizers and Slavophiles. Westernizers championed European constitutionalism, science, and civic freedoms; Slavophiles emphasized Orthodoxy, communal traditions, and Russia's distinct path. Under Nicholas I (1825–1855), official ideology—"Orthodoxy, Autocracy, Nationality"—and the Third Section's surveillance tightened censorship, channeling public discussion into coded literary form. Thick journals such as Sovremennik and Otechestvennye Zapiski became crucial venues for criticism and serialized fiction. Writers and critics—among them Vissarion Belinsky and Alexander Herzen—pressed literature into service as social diagnosis, encouraging works that anatomized character, habit, and the moral effects of institutions.

The Crimean War (1853–1856) exposed military, administrative, and technological weaknesses in the empire, discrediting complacency about Nicholas I's order. Alexander II's accession in 1855 ushered in policy reconsiderations culminating in the Emancipation of the serfs (1861) and a series of judicial, military, and local-government reforms. Oblomov belongs to the anticipatory moment just before emancipation, when the inevitability of change was widely felt but its scope remained uncertain. Readers encountered characters formed under serfdom and bureaucratic routine while sensing the approaching recalibration of duty, productivity, and citizenship that reform would demand of both estate owners and urban officials.

Serfdom structured estate economies through labor services (barshchina) or quitrent payments (obrok). Absentee landlordism and reliance on stewards were common, and many noble households faced chronic inefficiency and mounting obligations. Estate paternalism coexisted with legal subordination of peasants, producing a moral language of “care” that often masked dependency. In cities, consumption habits—tailored clothes, hired carriages, and spacious apartments—signaled rank and credit, even as income from the land faltered. This interplay of outward status and inward precariousness helps explain the period’s recurring literary interest in procrastination, dependency, and the difficulty of translating education or sentiment into sustained, practical action.

Russian realism matured in the 1840s–1850s, extending themes developed by Pushkin and Gogol into a social and psychological register. Gogol’s portraits of officials and petty clerks, and Turgenev’s sketches of rural life, modeled how narrative could illuminate systemic inertia without pamphleteering. Critics valorized precise observation, vernacular speech, and typical situations as vehicles of truth. Oblomov participates in this realist program: it stages ordinary rooms, letters, errands, meals, and conversations to expose the pressures of rank, habit, and estate administration. The “superfluous man” tradition—figures educated yet ineffectual—provided a recognizable type for readers attuned to reform-era dilemmas.

Goncharov (1812–1891) was born in Simbirsk on the Volga, studied at Moscow University, and worked in St. Petersburg’s civil service, including the Ministry of Finance’s

Foreign Trade Department. His experience in bureaucratic routines and observation of capital society informed his prose. A Common Story (1847) examined the collision of provincial idealism with metropolitan pragmatism; his travel account The Frigate Pallada (1858) broadened his perspectives on modernity and administration. Oblomov, developed over years and published in 1859, benefited from this accumulated knowledge of office life, estate culture, and the literary techniques of measured, observational realism.

Upon publication, the novel was quickly read as a diagnosis of a broader social condition. The critic Nikolai Dobrolyubov famously labeled that condition “Oblomovism,” identifying habitual apathy and dependence fostered by serfdom, paternalism, and bureaucratic formality. Without divulging the plot, one can say the book’s situations and conversations lay bare how institutions reward passivity, how status cushions responsibility, and how sentiment falters before sustained work. Positioned between the discrediting of old arrangements after the Crimean War and the reforms of the 1860s, Oblomov reflects its era’s crisis of will and offers a calm, exacting critique of the society that produced it.

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OBLOMOV

BY

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RUSKIN HOUSE 40 MUSEUM STREET, W.C.

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PART I

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I

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One morning, in a flat in one of the great buildings in Gorokliovaia Street[1], * the population of which was sufficient to constitute that of a provincial town, there was lying in bed a gentleman named Ilya Ilyitch Oblomov. He was a fellow of a little over thirty, of medium height, and of pleasant exterior. Unfortunately, in his dark-grey eyes there was an absence of any definite idea, and in his other features a total lack of concentration. Suddenly a thought would wander across his face with the freedom of a bird, flutter for a moment in his eyes, settle on his half-opened lips, and remain momentarily lurking in the lines of his forehead. Then it would disappear, and once more his face would glow with a radiant *insouciance* which extended even to his attitude and the folds of his night-robe. At other times his glance would darken as with weariness or *ennui*. Yet neither the one nor

the other expression could altogether banish from his countenance that gentleness which was the ruling, the fundamental, characteristic, not only of his features, but also of the spirit it which lay beneath them. That spirit shone in his eyes, in his smile, and in his every movement of hand and head**[1q]**. On glancing casually at Oblomov a cold, a superficially observant person would have said, “Evidently he is good-natured, but a simpleton;” whereas a person of greater penetration and sympathy than the first would have prolonged his glance, and then gone on his way thoughtfully, and with a smile as though he were pleased with something.

* One of the principal streets of Petrograd.

Oblomov’s face was neither reddy nor dull nor pale, but of an indefinite hue. At all events, that was the impression which it gave—possibly because, through insufficiency of exercise, or through want of fresh air, or through a lack of both, he was wrinkled beyond his years. In general, to judge from the extreme whiteness of his bare neck, his small, puffy hands, and his soft shoulders, one would conclude that he possessed an effeminate body. Even when excited, his actions were governed by an unvarying gentleness, added to a lassitude that was not devoid of a certain peculiar grace. On the other hand, should depression of spirits show itself in his face, His glance would grow dull, and his brow furrowed, as doubt, despondency, and apprehension fell to contending with one another. Yet this crisis of emotion seldom crystallized into the form of a definite idea—still less into that of a fixed resolve. Almost always such emotion evaporated in a sigh, and shaded off into a sort of apathetic lethargy**[2q]**.

Oblomov’s indoor costume corresponded exactly with the quiet outlines of his face and the effeminacy of his form. The costume in question consisted of a dressing-gown of some Persian material—a real Eastern dressing-gown—a garment that was devoid both of tassels and velvet facings and a waist, yet so roomy that Oblomov might have wrapped himself in it once or twice over. Also, in accordance with the immutable custom of Asia, its sleeves widened steadily from knuckles to shoulder. True, it was a dressing-gown which had lost its pristine freshness, and had, in places, exchanged its natural, original sheen for one acquired by hard wear; yet still it retained both the clarity of its Oriental colouring and the soundness of its texture. In Oblomov’s eyes It was a garment possessed of a myriad invaluable qualities, for it was so soft and pliable that, when wearing it, the body was unaware of its presence, and, like an obedient slave, it answered even to the slightest movement. Neither waistcoat nor cravat did Oblomov wear when indoors, since he loved freedom and space. For the same reason his slippers were long, soft, and broad, to the end that, whenever he lowered his legs from the bed to the floor without looking at what he was doing, his feet might fit into the slippers at once.

With Oblomov, lying in bed was neither a necessity (as in the case of an invalid or of a man who stands badly in need of sleep) nor an accident (as in the case of a man who is feeling worn out) nor a gratification (as in the case of a man who is purely lazy). Rather, it represented his normal condition. Whenever he was at home—and almost always he was at home—he would spend his time in lying on his

back. Likewise he used but the one room—which was combined to serve both as bedroom, as study, and as reception-room—in which we have just discovered him. True, two other rooms lay at his disposal, but seldom did he look into them save on mornings (which did not comprise by any means every morning) when his old valet happened to be sweeping out the study. The furniture in them stood perennially covered over, and never were the blinds drawn up.

At first sight the room in which Oblomov was lying was a well-fitted one. In it there stood a writing-table of redwood, a couple of sofas, upholstered in some silken material, and a handsome screen that was embroidered with birds and fruits unknown to Nature.

Also the room contained silken curtains, a few mats, some pictures, bronzes, and pieces of china, and a multitude of other pretty trifles. Yet even the most cursory glance from the experienced eye of a man of taste would have detected no more than a tendency to observe *les convenances* while escaping their actual observance. Without doubt that was all that Oblomov had thought of when furnishing his study. Taste of a really refined nature would never have remained satisfied with such ponderous, ungainly redwood chairs, with such rickety whatnots. Moreover, the back of one of the sofas had sagged, and, here and there, the wood had come away from the glue. Much the same thing was to be seen in the case of the pictures, the vases, and certain other trifles of the apartment. Nevertheless, its master was accustomed to regard its appurtenances with the cold, detached eye of one

who would ask, “Who has dared to bring this stuff here?” The same indifference on his part, added to, perhaps, an even greater indifference on the part of his servant, Zakhar, caused the study, when contemplated with attention, to strike the beholder with an impression of all-prevailing carelessness and neglect. On the walls and around the pictures there hung cobwebs coated with dust; the mirrors, instead of reflecting, would more usefully have served as tablets for recording memoranda; every mat was freely spotted with stains; on the sofa there lay a forgotten towel, and on the table (as on most mornings) a plate, a salt-cellar, a half-eaten crust of bread, and some scattered crumbs—all of which had failed to be cleared away after last night’s supper. Indeed, were it not for the plate, for a recently smoked pipe that was propped against the bed, and for the recumbent form of Oblomov himself, one might have imagined that the place contained not a single living soul, so dusty and discoloured did everything look, and so lacking were any active traces of the presence of a human being. True, on the whatnots there were two or three open books, while a newspaper was tossing about, and the bureau bore on its top an inkstand and a few pens; but the pages at which the books were lying open were covered with dust and beginning to turn yellow (thus proving that they had long been tossed aside), the date of the newspaper belonged to the previous year, and from the inkstand, whenever a pen happened to be dipped therein, there arose, with a frightened buzz, only a derelict fly.

On this particular morning Oblomov had (contrary to his usual custom) awakened at the early hour of eight.

Somehow he looked perturbed; anxiety, regret, and vexation kept chasing one another across his features. Evidently he had fallen a prey to some inward struggle, and had not yet been able to summon his wits to the rescue. The fact of the matter was that, overnight, he had received from the *starosta**[2]* * of his country estate an exceedingly unpleasant letter. We all know what disagreeable things a *starosta* can say in his letters—how he can tell of bad harvests, of arrears of debt, of diminished incomes, and so forth; and though this particular official had been inditing precisely similar epistles during the past three years, his latest communication had affected its recipient as powerfully as though Oblomov had received an unlooked-for blow. Yet, to do Oblomov justice, he had always bestowed a certain care upon his affairs. Indeed, no sooner had he received the *starosta's* first disturbing letter (he had done so three years ago) than he had set about devising a plan for changing and improving the administration of his property. Yet to this day the plan in question remained not fully thought out, although long ago he had recognized the necessity of doing something actually decisive.

* Overseer or steward.

Consequently, on awakening, he resolved to rise, to perform his ablutions, and his tea consumed, to consider matters, to jot down a few notes, and, in general, to tackle the affair properly. Yet for another halfhour he lay prone under the torture of this resolve; until eventually he decided that such tackling could best be done after tea, and that, as usual, he would drink that tea in bed—the more so since a recumbent position could not prove a hindrance to thought.

Therefore he did as he had decided; and when the tea had been consumed he raised himself upon his elbow and arrived within an ace of getting out of bed. In fact, glancing at his slippers, he even began to extend a foot in their direction, but presently withdrew it.

Half-past ten struck, and Oblomov gave himself a shake. “What is the matter?” he said vexedly. “In all conscience ’tis time that I were doing something! Would I could make up my mind to—to———” He broke off with a shout of “Zakhar!” whereupon there entered an elderly man in a grey suit and brass buttons—a man who sported beneath a perfectly bald pate a pair of long, bushy, grizzled whiskers that would have sufficed to fit out three ordinary men with beards. His clothes, it is true, were cut according to a country pattern, but he cherished them as a faint reminder of his former livery, as the one surviving token of the dignity of the house of Oblomov. The house of Oblomov was one which had once been wealthy and distinguished, but which, of late years, had undergone impoverishment and diminution, until finally it had become lost among a crowd of noble houses of more recent creation.

For a few moments Oblomov remained too plunged in thought to notice Zakhar’s presence; but at length the valet coughed.

“What do you want?” Oblomov inquired.

“You called me just now, *barin*?” *

* “Master” or “sir”

“I called you, you say? Well, I cannot remember why I did so. Return to your room until I *have* remembered.”

Zakliar retired, and Oblomov spent another quarter of an hour in thinking over the accursed letter.

“I have lain here long enough,” at last he said to himself. “Really, I *must* rise.... But suppose I were to read the letter through carefully and *then* to rise? Zakhar!”

Zakhar re-entered, and Oblomov straightway sank into a reverie. For a minute or two the valet stood eyeing his master with covert resentment. Then he moved towards the door.

“Why are you going away?” Oblomov asked suddenly.

“Because, *barin*, you have nothing to say to me. Why should I stand here for nothing?”

“What? Have your legs become so shrunken that you cannot stand for a moment or two? I am worried about something, so you *must* wait. You have just been lying down in your room, haven’t you? Please search for the letter which arrived from the *starosta* last night. What have you done with it?”

“What letter? *I* have seen no letter,” asserted Zakhar.

“But you took it from the postman yourself?”

“Maybe I did, but how am I to know where you have since placed it?” The valet fussed about among the papers and other things on the table.

“You never know anything,” remarked his master. “Look in that basket there. Or possibly the letter has fallen behind the sofa? By the way, the back of that sofa has not yet been mended. Tell the joiner to come at once. It was you that broke the thing, yet you never give it a thought!”

“I did *not* break it,” retorted Zakhar. “It broke of itself. It couldn’t have lasted for ever. It was bound to crack some