

Diaboliad
and Other Stories

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and Other Stories

Mikhail Bulgakov

Translated by Hugh Aplin



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Diaboliad
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DIABOLIAD

The Tale of how Twins Destroyed a Chief Clerk

I

The Occurrence of the 20th

AT A TIME WHEN EVERYONE was hopping from one job to another, Comrade Korotkov was working solidly at MaCenDepMatchMat (the Main Central Depot of Match Materials) in the permanent post of chief clerk, and he had worked there for eleven whole months.

Having found his niche at MatchMat, the quiet, gentle, fair-haired Korotkov had completely expunged from his soul the idea of the existence in the world of the so-called vicissitudes of fate, and had inculcated in its stead a certainty that he, Korotkov, would work at the depot until the conclusion of his life on earth. But, alas, it didn't turn out that way at all...

On 20th September 1921, the MatchMat cashier donned his repulsive, big-eared hat, packed the lined payroll away in his briefcase and left. This was at 11 a.m.

The cashier returned at 4.30 p.m., completely soaked. On arriving, he shook the water off his hat, placed the hat on his desk and the briefcase on the hat, and said:

“Don't crowd me, ladies and gentlemen.”

Then, for some reason, he rummaged around in the desk, left the room, and returned a quarter of an hour later with a large dead chicken whose neck had been wrung. He placed the chicken on the briefcase and his right hand on the chicken, and intoned:

“There won’t be any money.”

“Tomorrow?” cried the women in unison.

“No,” the cashier shook his head, “there won’t be any tomorrow either, or the day after. Don’t crowd, ladies and gentlemen, or else you’ll overturn my desk, Comrades.”

“How’s that?” everyone exclaimed, including the naive Korotkov.

“Citizens!” the cashier sang out in a plaintive voice, and brushed Korotkov aside with his elbow. “I implore you!”

“But how can that be?” everyone cried, and that comical fellow Korotkov loudest of all.

“Well, here,” the cashier muttered huskily, and pulling the payroll out of his briefcase, he showed it to Korotkov.

Slanting above the place where the cashier’s dirty fingernail was prodding, it said in red ink:

Pay. On behalf of Comrade Subbotnikov

– *Senate.*

In purple ink below was written:

There’s no money. On behalf of Comrade Ivanov

– *Smirnov.*

“How’s that?” cried Korotkov alone, while the others, panting, fell upon the cashier.

“Oh, Good Lord!” the latter moaned in dismay. “What’s it got to do with me? God Almighty!”

Hurriedly stuffing the payroll into his briefcase, he donned his hat, tucked the briefcase under his arm, brandished the chicken, cried, “Let me through, please,” and forcing a breach in the living wall, he disappeared through the doorway.

After him with a squeal ran the pale registrar on high, pointed heels, and right by the door the left heel fell off with a crunch, the registrar swayed, lifted her foot and removed the shoe.

And with one foot bare, she remained in the room, as did all the rest, including Korotkov.

II

Produce of Production

Three days after the event described, the door of the private room where Comrade Korotkov worked was pushed open a little, and a tear-stained woman’s head said maliciously:

“Comrade Korotkov, go and get your salary.”

“How’s that?” Korotkov exclaimed joyfully, and whistling the overture to *Carmen*,* he ran to the room with the sign “Cash Office”. He stopped by the cashier’s desk, and his mouth fell wide open. Two thick columns of yellow packets towered right up to the ceiling. So as not to answer any questions, the sweaty and agitated

cashier had fixed the payroll to the wall with a drawing pin, and on it now was a third inscription in green ink:

Pay in produce of production.

On behalf of Comrade Bogoyavlensky

— Preobrazhensky.

I think so too

— Kshesinsky.

Korotkov left the cashier with a broad and stupid smile. In his arms were four large yellow packets and five small green ones, and in his pockets there were thirteen blue boxes of matches. In his room, listening to the hum of astonished voices in the general office, he wrapped the matches up in two enormous sheets from that day's newspaper and, without giving anyone any warning, left work to go home. By the entrance to MatchMat he was almost run over by a car that was just driving up, but who exactly was in it Korotkov couldn't make out.

Getting home, he laid the matches out on the table and stepped back to admire them. The stupid smile had never left his face. Then Korotkov ruffled his blond hair and said to himself:

“Well now, there's no point sitting around moping. Let's try and sell them.”

He knocked on the door of his neighbour, Alexandra Fyodorovna, who worked at the Provincial Wine Warehouse.

“Come in,” was the muffled response from inside her room.

Korotkov went in and was astonished. Alexandra Fyodorovna had returned home from work prematurely and was squatting on the floor in her coat and hat. In front of her stood a formation of bottles with stoppers made of newsprint, filled with liquid of a deep red colour. Alexandra Fyodorovna's face was tear-stained.

"Forty-six," she said, and turned to Korotkov.

"Is it ink?... Hello, Alexandra Fyodorovna," intoned the stunned Korotkov.

"Communion wine," replied his neighbour with a sob.

"What, you too?" gasped Korotkov.

"Have you been given communion wine as well?" asked Alexandra Fyodorovna in astonishment.

"We've been given matches," Korotkov replied in a fading voice, and twisted a button on his jacket.

"But they don't light, do they!" exclaimed Alexandra Fyodorovna, standing up and giving her skirt a shake.

"How do you mean, they don't light?" Korotkov said in alarm, and rushed to his room. There, without losing a moment, he grabbed a box, unsealed it with a snap and struck a match. It hissed and flared up with a greenish light, broke in two and went out. Choking at the pungent smell of sulphur, Korotkov had a nasty fit of coughing and lit a second. This one gave a bang, and two sparks spurted out from it. The first hit the window pane, and the second hit Comrade Korotkov's left eye.

"A-ah!" Korotkov cried, and dropped the box.

For a few moments he lifted up first one foot then the other like a heated horse, and pressed the palm of his hand against his eye. Then he glanced in the shaving mirror, horrified, certain that he had lost his eye. But his

eye proved to be in place. True, it was red and shedding tears.

“Oh my God!” said Korotkov, distraught, and immediately took an American individual dressing from the chest of drawers, opened it up, tied it round the left side of his head and came to resemble a man injured in battle.

Korotkov didn't put the light out all night, but lay there striking matches. In this way he used up three entire boxes, and in so doing managed to light sixty-three matches.

“She's talking nonsense, the idiot,” Korotkov grumbled, “they're excellent matches.”

By morning the room had filled with the asphyxiating smell of sulphur. Korotkov fell asleep at dawn and had an idiotic bad dream: as though on a green meadow there appeared before him an enormous, live billiard ball with legs. It was so horrible that Korotkov cried out and woke up. In the dim gloom, it seemed to him for another five seconds or so that the ball was there, beside the bed, smelling very strongly of sulphur. But then it all passed: after tossing and turning for a while, Korotkov fell asleep and woke no more.

III

The Appearance of the Bald Man

The next morning, upon moving the bandage aside, Korotkov was satisfied that his eye was almost better. Nonetheless, the excessively cautious Korotkov decided against removing the bandage for the time being.

Arriving for work very late, the cunning Korotkov went straight through to his room so as not to excite any misinterpretation amongst the junior office workers, and found on his desk a document in which the manager of the supply subsection asked the depot manager whether uniform was to be issued to the typists. Having read the document with his right eye, Korotkov picked it up and set off down the corridor to the office of Comrade Chekushin, the depot manager.

And it was right by the door of the office that Korotkov bumped into a stranger, whose appearance amazed him.

This stranger was so short that he only came up as far as the tall Korotkov's waist. The lack of height found compensation in the extreme breadth of the stranger's shoulders. His square trunk sat on crooked legs, and the left one, moreover, was lame. But most noteworthy of all was his head. It constituted an exact, gigantic model of an egg, set horizontally on the neck and with the pointed end at the front. It was bald like an egg too, and so shiny that electric light bulbs glowed on the stranger's crown without ever going out. The stranger's tiny face had been shaved until it was blue, and his green eyes, as small as pinheads, sat in deep hollows. The stranger's body was clothed in an unbuttoned service jacket made out of a grey blanket, from beneath which peeped an embroidered Little Russian shirt, and his legs were in trousers of the same material and the low-cut boots of a hussar from the time of Alexander I.*

"Little w-weirdo," thought Korotkov, and headed towards Chekushin's door, trying to avoid the bald man. But quite unexpectedly, the latter barred Korotkov's way.

“What do you want?” the bald man asked Korotkov, in such a voice that the highly strung chief clerk winced. That voice was exactly like the voice of a copper basin, and was notable for having such a timbre that at each word, everyone who heard it had the sensation of a rough wire running down their spine. Apart from that, it seemed to Korotkov that the unknown man’s words smelt of matches. Despite all this, the short-sighted Korotkov did what he shouldn’t have done under any circumstances – he took offence.

“Hm... rather strange. I’m taking a document... But permit me to know who you—”

“Do you see what’s written on the door?”

Korotkov looked at the door and saw the long-familiar sign: “Report before entering”.

“And I do have a report,” said Korotkov foolishly, indicating his document.

The bald, square man unexpectedly grew angry. His little eyes flashed with yellowish sparks.

“You, Comrade,” he said, deafening Korotkov with the noise of saucepans, “are so backward that you don’t understand the meaning of the simplest office signs. I’m truly amazed at how you’ve remained in work until now. There’s a lot of interesting things here generally, these black eyes at every turn, for example. Well, never mind, we’ll put it all in order.” (“A-ah,” Korotkov gasped to himself.) “Give it here!”

And with those final words the unknown man tore the document from Korotkov’s hands, read it in an instant, pulled a chewed indelible pencil from his trouser pocket, held the document up against the wall and wrote a number of slanting words.

“Be off!” he bellowed, and jabbed the document at Korotkov in such a way that he almost poked out his last remaining eye. The office door howled and swallowed the unknown man, while Korotkov remained rooted to the spot – there was no sign of Chekushin in the office.

The disconcerted Korotkov came round half a minute later, when he ran right into Lidochka de-Runi, Comrade Chekushin’s personal secretary.

“A-ah!” Comrade Korotkov gasped. Lidochka’s eye was swaddled in exactly the same individual dressing material, the only difference being that the ends of the bandage were tied in a coquettish bow.

“What happened to you?”

“Matches!” Lidochka replied irritably. “The damned things.”

“Who’s that man in there?” the crestfallen Korotkov asked in a whisper.

“Didn’t you know?” whispered Lidochka. “He’s new.”

“How’s that?” Korotkov squeaked. “What about Chekushin?”

“He was sacked yesterday,” said Lidochka crossly, and added, jabbing a finger in the direction of the office: “What a goo-oose. Now he really is a dodgy character. I’ve never seen anyone so disagreeable in my life. He yells! And you’re fired!... Baldy pants!” she added unexpectedly, so that Korotkov goggled at her.

“What’s his na—”

Korotkov didn’t have time to ask. Behind the office door the terrible voice crashed out: “Courier!” The chief clerk and the secretary instantly flew off in different directions. Flying into his room, Korotkov sat down at the desk and made this speech to himself:

“Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear... Well, Korotkov, you’re in a pickle. This little matter needs to be put right... ‘Backward’... Hm... The cheek... All right! You’ll see how backward Korotkov is.”

And with one eye the chief clerk read the bald man’s writing. On the document were the slanting words: “All typists and women generally will in due course be issued soldiers’ uniform drawers.”

“That’s fantastic!” Korotkov exclaimed in rapture, and gave a voluptuous shudder, imagining Lidochka in soldiers’ drawers. He took out a clean sheet of paper forthwith and in three minutes had written:

Telephoned telegram.

Manager supply subsection stop In reply your memo No. 0.15015 (6) of 19th comma MainMatchMat informs that all typists and women generally will in due course be issued soldiers’ uniform drawers stop Manager dash signature Chief Clerk dash Varfolomei Korotkov stop

He rang a bell, and when the courier Panteleimon came, he said to him:

“To the manager for signature.”

Panteleimon chewed his lips for a moment, took the document and left the room.

For four hours thereafter, Korotkov listened intently without leaving his room, on the basis that, if the new manager took it into his head to make a round of the premises, he would be sure to find him buried in his work. But no sound came from the terrible office. Only once did the muffled cast-iron voice reach him, seemingly

threatening to fire someone, but whom exactly Korotkov couldn't hear, even though he put his ear to the keyhole. At 3.30 p.m. Panteleimon's voice rang out beyond the wall of the general office:

“He's driven off in a car.”

The general office at once became noisy, and everybody dispersed. Later than anyone else, Comrade Korotkov left in solitude for home.

IV

First Paragraph – Korotkov's Out

The next morning, Korotkov satisfied himself joyfully that his eye was no longer in need of treatment with the bandage, so he threw it off in relief, and immediately looked better and changed. After quickly having some tea, Korotkov extinguished the primus and ran off to work, trying not to be late, but he *was* late by fifty minutes owing to the fact that, instead of going by Route 6, the tram went by the roundabout Route 7, drove into far-off streets with little houses and then broke down. Korotkov covered two miles on foot and, panting, ran into the general office just as the kitchen clock of Die Alpenrose* struck eleven times. A spectacle awaited him in the general office that was quite exceptional for eleven o'clock in the morning. Lidochka de-Runi, Milochka Litovtseva, Anna Yevgrafovna, the senior accountant Drozd, the instructor Gitis, Nomeratsky, Ivanov, Mushka, the registrar, the cashier – in a word, the entire office – instead of sitting in their places at the kitchen tables of the former restaurant

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