

Nikolai Gogol

THE MANTLE

In a certain Russian ministerial department-

But it is perhaps better that I do not mention which department it was. There are in the whole of Russia no persons more sensitive than Government officials. Each of them believes if he is annoyed in any way, that the whole official class is insulted in his person.

Recently an Isprawnik (country magistrate)-I do not know of which town-is said to have drawn up a report with the object of showing that, ignoring Government orders, people were speaking of Isprawniks in terms of contempt. In order to prove his assertions, he forwarded with his report a bulky work of fiction, in which on about every tenth page an Isprawnik appeared generally in a drunken condition.

In order therefore to avoid any unpleasantness, I will not definitely indicate the department in which the scene of my story is laid, and will rather say "in a certain chancellery."

Well, in a certain chancellery there was a certain man who, as I cannot deny, was not of an attractive appearance. He was short, had a face marked with smallpox, was rather bald in front, and his forehead and cheeks were deeply lined with furrows-to say nothing

of other physical imperfections. Such was the outer aspect of our hero, as produced by the St Petersburg climate.

As regards his official rank-for with us Russians the official rank must always be given-he was what is usually known as a permanent titular councillor, one of those unfortunate beings who, as is well known, are made a butt of by various authors who have the bad habit of attacking people who cannot defend themselves.

Our hero's family name was Bashmatchkin; his baptismal name Akaki Akakievitch. Perhaps the reader may think this name somewhat strange and far-fetched, but he can be assured that it is not so, and that circumstances so arranged it that it was quite impossible to give him any other name.

This happened in the following way. Akaki Akakievitch was born, if I am not mistaken, on the night of the 23rd of March. His deceased mother, the wife of an official and a very good woman, immediately made proper arrangements for his baptism. When the time came, she was lying on the bed before the door. At her right hand stood the godfather, Ivan Ivanovitch Jeroshkin, a very important person, who was registrar of the senate; at her left, the godmother Anna Semenovna Byelobrushkova, the wife of a police inspector, a woman of rare virtues.

Three names were suggested to the mother from

which to choose one for the child-Mokuja, Sossuja, or Khozdazat.

“No,” she said, “I don't like such names.”

In order to meet her wishes, the church calendar was opened in another place, and the names Triphiliy, Dula, and Varakhasiy were found.

“This is a punishment from heaven,” said the mother. “What sort of names are these! I never heard the like! If it had been Varadat or Varukh, but Triphiliy and Varakhasiy!”

They looked again in the calendar and found Pavsikakhiy and Vakhtisiy.

“Now I see,” said the mother, “this is plainly fate. If there is no help for it, then he had better take his father's name, which was Akaki.”

So the child was called Akaki Akakievitch. It was baptised, although it wept and cried and made all kinds of grimaces, as though it had a presentiment that it would one day be a titular councillor.

We have related all this so conscientiously that the reader himself might be convinced that it was impossible for the little Akaki to receive any other name. When and how he entered the chancellery and who appointed him, no one could remember. However many of his superiors might come and go, he was always seen in the same spot, in the same attitude, busy with the same work, and bearing the same title; so that people began to believe he had come into the world just

as he was, with his bald forehead and official uniform.

In the chancellery where he worked, no kind of notice was taken of him. Even the office attendants did not rise from their seats when he entered, nor look at him; they took no more notice than if a fly had flown through the room. His superiors treated him in a coldly despotic manner. The assistant of the head of the department, when he pushed a pile of papers under his nose, did not even say "Please copy those," or "There is something interesting for you," or make any other polite remark such as well-educated officials are in the habit of doing. But Akaki took the documents, without worrying himself whether they had the right to hand them over to him or not, and straightway set to work to copy them.

His young colleagues made him the butt of their ridicule and their elegant wit, so far as officials can be said to possess any wit. They did not scruple to relate in his presence various tales of their own invention regarding his manner of life and his landlady, who was seventy years old. They declared that she beat him, and inquired of him when he would lead her to the marriage altar. Sometimes they let a shower of scraps of paper fall on his head, and told him they were snowflakes.

But Akaki Akakievitch made no answer to all these attacks; he seemed oblivious of their presence. His work was not affected in the slightest degree; during all these interruptions he did not make a single

error in copying. Only when the horse-play grew intolerable, when he was held by the arm and prevented writing, he would say "Do leave me alone! Why do you always want to disturb me at work?" There was something peculiarly pathetic in these words and the way in which he uttered them.

One day it happened that when a young clerk, who had been recently appointed to the chancellery, prompted by the example of the others, was playing him some trick, he suddenly seemed arrested by something in the tone of Akaki's voice, and from that moment regarded the old official with quite different eyes. He felt as though some supernatural power drew him away from the colleagues whose acquaintance he had made here, and whom he had hitherto regarded as well-educated, respectable men, and alienated him from them. Long afterwards, when surrounded by gay companions, he would see the figure of the poor little councillor and hear the words "Do leave me alone! Why will you always disturb me at work?" Along with these words, he also heard others: "Am I not your brother?" On such occasions the young man would hide his face in his hands, and think how little humane feeling after all was to be found in men's hearts; how much coarseness and cruelty was to be found even in the educated and those who were everywhere regarded as good and honourable men.

Never was there an official who did his work so