

The Devil

By Maxim Gorky

Life is a burden in the Fall,—the sad season of decay and death!

The grey days, the weeping, sunless sky, the dark nights, the growling, whining wind, the heavy, black autumn shadows—all that drives clouds of gloomy thoughts over the human soul, and fills it with a mysterious fear of life where nothing is permanent, all is in an eternal flux; things are born, decay, die . . . why? . . . for what purpose? . . .

Sometimes the strength fails us to battle against the tenebrous thoughts that enfold the soul late in the autumn, therefore those who want to assuage their bitterness ought to meet them half way. This is the only way by which they will escape from the chaos of despair and doubt, and will enter on the terra firma of self-confidence.

But it is a laborious path, it leads through thorny brambles that lacerate the living heart, and on that path the devil always lies in ambush. It is that best of all the devils, with whom the great Goethe has made us acquainted. . . .

My story is about that devil.

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The devil suffered from ennui.

He is too wise to ridicule everything.

He knows that there are phenomena of life which the devil himself is not able to rail at; for example, he has never applied the sharp scalpel of his irony to the majestic fact of his existence. To tell the truth, our favourite devil is more bold than clever, and if we were to look more closely at him, we might discover that, like ourselves, he wastes most of his time on trifles. But we had better leave that alone; we are not children that break their best toys in order to discover what is in them.

The devil once wandered over the cemetery in the darkness of an autumn night: he felt lonely and whistled softly as he looked around himself in search of a distraction. He whistled an old song—my father's favourite song,—

“When, in autumnal days,
A leaf from its branch is torn
And on high by the wind is borne.”

And the wind sang with him, sighing over the graves and among the black crosses, and heavy autumnal clouds slowly crawled over the heaven and with their cold tears watered the narrow dwellings of the dead. The mournful trees in the cemetery timidly creaked under the strokes of the wind and stretched their bare branches to the speechless clouds. The branches were now and then caught by the crosses, and then a dull, shuffling, awful sound passed over the churchyard. . .

The devil was whistling, and he thought:

“I wonder how the dead feel in such weather! No doubt, the dampness goes down to them, and although they are secure against rheumatism ever since the day of their death, yet, I suppose, they do not feel comfortable. How, if I called one of them up and had a talk with him? It would

be a little distraction for me, and, very likely, for him also. I will call him! Somewhere around here they have buried an old friend of mine, an author. . . . I used to visit him when he was alive . . . why not renew our acquaintance? People of his kind are dreadfully exacting. I shall find out whether the grave satisfies him completely. But where is his grave?"

And the devil who, as is well known, knows everything, wandered for a long time about the cemetery, before he found the author's grave. . . .

"Oh there!" he called out as he knocked with his claws at the heavy stone under which his acquaintance was put away.

"Get up!"

"What for?" came the dull answer from below.

"I need you."

"I won't get up.

"Why?"

"Who are you, anyway?"

"You know me.

"The censor?"

"Ha, ha, ha! No!"

"Maybe a secret policeman?"

"No, no!"

"Not a critic, either?"

"I am the devil."

"Well, I'll be out in a minute."

The stone lifted itself from the grave, the earth burst open, and a skeleton came out of it. It was a very common skeleton, just the kind that students study anatomy by: only it was dirty, had no wire connections, and in the empty sockets there shone a blue phosphoric light instead of eyes. It crawled out of the ground, shook its bones in order to throw off the earth that stuck to them, making a dry, rattling noise with them, and raising up its skull, looked with its cold, blue eyes at the murky, cloud-covered sky. "I hope you are well!" said the devil.

"How can I be?" curtly answered the author. He spoke in a strange, low voice, as if two bones were grating against each other.

"Oh, excuse my greeting!" the devil said pleasantly.

"Never mind! . . . But why have you raised me?"

"I just wanted to take a walk with you, though the weather is very bad."

"I suppose you are not afraid of catching a cold?" asked the devil.

"Not at all, I got used to catching colds during my lifetime."

"Yes, I remember, you died pretty cold."

"I should say I did! They had poured enough cold water over me all my life."

They walked beside each other over the narrow path, between graves and crosses. Two blue beams fell from the author's eyes upon the ground and lit the way for the devil. A drizzling rain sprinkled over them, and the wind freely passed between the author's bare ribs and through his breast where there was no longer a heart.

"We are going to town?" he asked the devil.

"What interests you there?"

"Life, my dear sir," the author said impassionately.

"What! It still has a meaning for you?"

"Indeed it has!"

“But why?”

“How am I to say it? A man measures all by the quantity of his effort, and if he carries a common stone down from the summit of Ararat, that stone becomes a gem to him.”

“Poor fellow!” smiled the devil.

“But also happy man!” the author retorted coldly.

The devil shrugged his shoulders.

They left the churchyard, and before them lay a street,—two rows of houses, and between them was darkness in which the miserable lamps clearly proved the want of light upon earth.

“Tell me,” the devil spoke after a pause, “how do you like your grave?”

“Now I am used to it, and it is all right: it is very quiet there.”

“Is it not damp down there in the Fall?” asked the devil.

“A little. But you get used to that. The greatest annoyance comes from those various idiots who ramble over the cemetery and accidentally stumble on my grave. I don’t know how long I have been lying in my grave, for I and everything around me is unchangeable, and the concept of time does not exist for me.”

“You have been in the ground four years,—it will soon be five,” said the devil.

“Indeed? Well then, there have been three people at my grave during that time. Those accursed people make me nervous. One, you see, straight away denied the fact of my existence: he read my name on the tombstone and said confidently: ‘There never was such a man! I have never read him, though I remember such a name: when I was a boy, there lived a man of that name who had a broker’s shop in our street.’ How do you like that? And my articles appeared for sixteen years in the most popular periodicals, and three times during my lifetime my books came out in separate editions.”

“There were two more editions since your death,” the devil informed him.

“Well, you see? Then came two, and one of them said: ‘Oh, that’s that fellow!’ ‘Yes, that is he!’ answered the other. ‘Yes, they used to read him in the auld lang syne.’ ‘They read a lot of them.’ ‘What was it he preached?’ ‘Oh, generally, ideas of beauty, goodness, and so forth.’ ‘Oh, yes, I remember.’ ‘He had a heavy tongue.’ ‘There is a lot of them in the ground:—yes, Russia is rich in talents’ . . . And those asses went away. It is true, warm words do not raise the temperature of the grave, and I do not care for that, yet it hurts me. And oh, how I wanted to give them a piece of my mind!”

“You ought to have given them a fine tongue-lashing!” smiled the devil.

“No, that would not have done. On the verge of the twentieth century it would be absurd for dead people to scold, and, besides, it would be hard on the materialists.

The devil again felt the ennui coming over him.

This author had always wished in his lifetime to be a bridegroom at all weddings and a corpse at all burials, and now that all is dead in him, his egotism is still alive. Is man of any importance to life? Of importance is only the human spirit, and only the spirit deserves applause and recognition. . . . How annoying people are! The devil was on the point of proposing to the author to return to his grave, when an idea flashed through his evil head. They had just reached a square, and heavy masses of buildings surrounded them on all sides. The dark, wet sky hung low over the square; it seemed as though it rested on the roofs and murkily looked at the dirty earth.

“Say,” said the devil as he inclined pleasantly towards the author, “don’t you want to know how your wife is getting on?”

“I don’t know whether I want to,” the author spoke slowly.

“I see, you are a thorough corpse!” called out the devil to annoy him.

“Oh, I don’t know?” said the author and jauntily shook his bones. “I don’t mind seeing her; besides, she will not see me, or if she will, she cannot recognize me!”

“Of course!” the devil assured him.

“You know, I only said so because she did not like for me to go away long from home,” explained the author.

And suddenly the wall of a house disappeared or became as transparent as glass. The author saw the inside of large apartments, and it was so light and cosy in them.

“Elegant appointments!” he grated his bones approvingly: “Very fine appointments! If I had lived in such rooms, I would be alive now.”

“I like it, too,” said the devil and smiled. “And it is not expensive—it only costs some three thousands.”

“Hem, that not expensive? I remember my largest work brought me 815 roubles, and I worked over it a whole year. But who lives here?”

“Your wife,” said the devil.

“I declare! That is good . . . for her.”

“Yes, and here comes her husband.”

“She is so pretty now, and how well she is dressed! Her husband, you say? What a fine looking fellow! Rather a bourgeois phiz,—kind, but somewhat stupid! He looks as if he might be cunning,—well, just the face to please a woman.”

“Do you want me to heave a sigh for you?” the devil proposed and looked maliciously at the author. But he was taken up with the scene before him.

“What happy, jolly faces both have! They are evidently satisfied with life. Tell me, does she love him?”

“Oh, yes, very much!”

“And who is he?”

“A clerk in a millinery shop.”

“A clerk in a millinery shop,” the author repeated slowly and did not utter a word for some time. The devil looked at him and smiled a merry smile.

“Do you like that?” he asked.

The author spoke with an effort:

“I had some children. . . . I know they are alive. . . . I had some children . . . a son and a daughter. . . . I used to think then that my son would turn out in time a good man. . . .”

“There are plenty of good men, but what the world needs is perfect men,” said the devil coolly and whistled a jolly march.

“I think the clerk is probably a poor pedagogue . . . and my son . . .”

The author’s empty skull shook sadly.

“Just look how he is embracing her! They are living an easy life!” exclaimed the devil.

“Yes. Is that clerk a rich man?”

“No, he was poorer than I, but your wife is rich.”

“My wife? Where did she get the money from?”

“From the sale of your books!”

“Oh!” said the author and shook his bare and empty skull. “Oh! Then it simply means that I have worked for a certain clerk?”

“I confess it looks that way,” the devil chimed in merrily.

The author looked at the ground and said to the devil:

“Take me back to my grave!”

. . . It was late. A rain fell, heavy clouds hung in the sky, and the author rattled his bones as he marched rapidly to his grave. . . . The devil walked behind him and whistled merrily.

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My reader is, of course, dissatisfied. My reader is surfeited with literature, and even the people that write only to please him, are rarely to his taste. In the present case my reader is also dissatisfied because I have said nothing about hell. As my reader is justly convinced that after death he will find his way there, he would like to know something about hell during his lifetime. Really, I can't tell anything pleasant to my reader on that score, because there is no hell, no fiery hell which it is so easy to imagine. Yet, there is something else and infinitely more terrible.

The moment the doctor will have said about you to your friends: "He is dead!" you will enter an immeasurable, illuminated space, and that is the space of the consciousness of your mistakes.

You lie in the grave, in a narrow coffin, and your miserable life rotates about you like a wheel.

It moves painfully slow, and passes before you from your first conscious step to the last moment of your life.

You will see all that you have hidden from yourself during your lifetime, all the lies and meanness of your existence: you will think over anew all your past thoughts, and you will see every wrong step of yours,—all your life will be gone over, to its minutest details! And to increase your torments, you will know that on that narrow and stupid road which you have traversed, others are marching, and pushing each other, and hurrying, and lying. . . . And you understand that they are doing it all only to find out in time how shameful it is to live such a wretched, soulless life.

And though you see them hastening on towards their destruction, you are in no way able to warn them: you will not move nor cry, and your helpless desire to aid them will tear your soul to pieces.

Your life passes before you, and you see it from the start, and there is no end to the work of your conscience, and there will be no end . . . and to the horror of your torments there will never be an end . . . never!