

Kochergà (THE POKER)

[In spite of his reluctance to scholasticize a joke, the translator must insert an explanation here. The word *kochergà*, which means "a poker," although common, is a strange one in Russian. It is of Tartar origin and follows an odd declension pattern. It should be added also that the numerals two, three, four, in Russian, govern the genitive singular, whereas the numerals from five on govern the genitive plural. The abundant variety of diminutive forms in Russian is also a factor in this story.]

An amusing event took place this last winter in a certain institution.

One should say that this institution occupied a not very large separate house. At the same time, the house was of ancient construction. The usual vulgar stoves heated this building.

A special man—the stoker—looked after these stoves. He went his melancholy way carrying a *kochergà* (a "poker") from floor to floor, poked the wood, adjusted the drafts, closed the pipes, and so forth, all in this vein.

In the midst of contemporary technology, with hot water and steam heating, one can say that this picture had something almost unpleasant about it, an old-fashioned picture depicting the barbaric ways of our ancestors.

This year, in February, the stoker, while making his way along the staircase, inflicted a slight burn on a certain employee, Nadia R., with his poker. The employee herself was partly to blame. She was scurrying along the staircase and bumped into the stoker. In the process, she stretched out her hand and unfortunately happened to touch the poker, which was fairly warm, if not to say red-hot.

The girl gasped and shrieked. And the stoker also gasped. In all, this fussy girl's palm and fingers were slightly singed.

Of course, this is a trivial and empty incident, unworthy to be spread out in the pages of creative literature. Nevertheless, the unexpected consequences of this event were quite amusing. And they have provided us with this little story.

The manager of the institution called in the stoker and gave him a stern talking-to. He said: "So, you're going around with your poker diminishing the ranks of my employees. Better look out where you're going and not gawk around in all directions."

The stoker, sobbing brokenly, answered that he had only one poker for six stoves, and with this one poker he had to go hither and yon. Now if only there were a poker for every stove, then there might be something to carp about. But under such circumstances he simply couldn't guarantee the untouchability of the employees.

This simple idea—to have a *kochergà* for every stove—pleased the manager. And he, not being a red-tape bureaucrat, immediately began to dictate to his typist an order for supplies. Pacing the room, the manager dictated: ". . . Having only one *kochergà* to service six stoves, it is impossible to protect the employees from unfortunate accidents. For this reason, therefore, I request that you promptly issue to the bearer of this order five *k* . . ."

But at this point, the manager broke off. He ceased dictation and, scratching his head, said to the typist: "What the devil. I've forgotten how you write five *k* . . . Three *kochergi*, clear. Four *kochergi*—understood. But five? Five what? Five *kocher* . . ."

The young typist shrugged her shoulders and said that all in all she was hearing this word for the first time. In any case, she had never declined a word like that in school.

The manager called his secretary and, with a troubled smile, told him of his difficulty.

The secretary immediately began to decline this word: "Nominative—*kochergà* . . . Genitive—*kochergi* . . . Dative—*kochergà* . . ." But arriving at the plural, the secretary gulped and said that the plural number was spinning around in his head but he couldn't remember it now.

Then he asked two other employees but they too did not succeed in shedding any light on the matter.

The secretary said: "There is an excellent way out. Let us make two requests for supplies—one for three pokers, and one for two. That way we'll get five."

The manager found this awkward. He said that sending two separate request slips would demoralize bookkeeping. They'd find ways of reproaching him for this. Better, when it came to that, to call up the Academy of Sciences and ask them how you write five *koche* . . .

The secretary was about to call the Academy, but at the last moment the manager didn't permit him to do this. What if some smart-aleck scholar should chance to answer the phone, somebody who would write a sketch in the newspaper to the effect that the manager isn't too literate, to the effect that scientific institutions are being bothered with such nonsense. No, better proceed by one's own means. It might be a good idea to call the stoker again in order to hear the word from his lips. In any case, the man's been hanging around stoves all his life. Surely he ought to know how to say five *koche* . . .

They called the stoker right away and began to probe him with leading questions.

The stoker, assuming that they were going to chew him out again, answered all the questions in gloomy monosyllables. He muttered: "You see, we need five; then, you see, we can be more careful." Otherwise, if they wanted, they could take him to court.

Having lost patience, the manager asked the stoker directly what they wanted to know.

"You know yourselves," the stoker answered morosely.

But at this point, under pressure from the secretary and the manager, the stoker at last pronounced the sought-after word. On the stoker's lips, however, this word did not sound anything like what they had expected, but something like this—"five *kocheryzhkek*."

Then the secretary hastened to the legal department and brought an employee from there who excelled in knowing how to draft papers so skillfully they could pass over any reefs.

They explained what was expected of him to this employee—he had to draft the necessary request in such a way that the word *kochergà* was not mentioned in the plural number while at the same time making sure that the institution would be supplied with five.

After chewing his pencil a bit, the employee sketched the following draft: "Until the present time our institution, while it has had six stoves, has had in all only one *kochergà*. In virtue of this, it is requested that five more be issued, so that each stove might have its own independent *kochergà*. Therefore, to be issued—five."

They were just about to send this paper off to the supply warehouse, when, at this point, the typist came up to the manager and said she had just called her mother, a senior typist with thirty

years' experience. And *she* had assured her that one had to write—five *kocherëg*.

The secretary said: "I thought so, too. Only I blanked out for the moment!"

Right away the form was drafted and sent off to the supply warehouse.

The funniest thing about this story is that the request form was soon returned with a note from the warehouse manager: "Refused, no *kocheryzhkek* in stock."

By this time, spring has come. Soon it will be summer. It's a long way to winter. There's no point in thinking about the heating in the meantime. In the spring it is well to think of literacy, as it were, in connection with the spring tests in the middle schools. As far as the above-mentioned word is concerned, it really is a tricky one, worthy of the Academy of Sciences or a typist of thirty years' experience.

All in all, it is necessary to transfer as rapidly as possible to steam heat. So that people can already begin to forget these old-fashioned words connected with wood heating.