

Valentin Katayev

(1897 -)

Son of a high-school teacher and grandson of a priest, Katayev was born in Odessa. His younger brother was the celebrated humorist Yevgeny Petrov (see Ilf and Petrov's "How the Soviet Robinson Was Written"). Many of Katayev's earlier stories were satirical burlesques. In 1926, he published The Embezzlers, an amusing novel of the years of the New Economic Policy in the 1920's. The author also of a number of plays, including Squaring the Circle, and the novel Time, Forward, which glorified the industrialization of Russia, Katayev quickly adapted himself to the stylistic and thematic demands of the Party critics and has been one of the more successful Soviet writers. He joined the Communist Party in 1958. As editor of the monthly Yunost ("Youth") in recent years, he was one of the more liberal forces on the Soviet literary scene, until removed from the post in January, 1962.

The Beautiful Trousers

by Valentin Katayev

There were two of them—a prose writer and a poet. Their names are unimportant. But they ate.

And in the next room in this huge, run-down hotel, which resembled a chest of drawers forced open and thrown into utter disarray by a burglar, a hotel full of dust, heat, the clanking of cavalry spurs, and the tramping of infantry boots, Master of Arts Zirlich sat naked on a striped mattress and read Apuleius in the original. He had graduated from the university with a degree from the Department of Romance Studies; he could read, write, and speak many languages; he worked in the diplomatic service; and he was very hungry.

His coarse cotton shirt, with laces instead of buttons, and his trousers, made of sacking and still bearing the stamp of the automobile transport depot where the sacks had done their service to begin with, were hanging on a nail. The philologist Zirlich owned nothing besides these trousers and this shirt, and he guarded and preserved them as carefully as a young lady preserves her ball gown.

His neighbors ate. He visualized perfectly how they ate and what they ate. Imagination, which is not ordinarily a quality associated with philologists, this time drew for him unforgettable Flemish still lifes. Not less than four pounds of excellent black bread and coarse salt. Very possibly, a samovar. At any rate, the sound of a falling cup was indescribable.

Zirlich leaned his crooked, gourd-shaped head on both hands and listened. They were chewing.

Zirlich swallowed his saliva. It was unbearable. Then he swept the bare room with his dusty eyes. A hopeless formality. Empti-

ness is emptiness. There was nothing edible about. He hurriedly licked his lips and stole on tiptoe to the keyhole.

They sat at the desk, ladling up with their spoons a salad of tomatoes, cucumbers, and onions. The salad bowl was very large. Next to the bowl lay a damp, bricklike loaf of bread. Over the samovar hung a cloud of steam and a thin buzzing sound as of a swarm of mosquitoes. The sun glared through the cotton shade, burning out on it the cross of the window frame.

"Gorging themselves," the Master of Arts thought sorrowfully.

He hesitated a moment, then he quickly slipped into his trousers. He knew what he had to do. He had to knock politely on the door and ask, "May I come in?" And then, "Tell me, my friends, do you happen to have a pen? Mine broke."

To knock politely!

He had knocked politely yesterday, the day before yesterday, last Wednesday, last Friday, and Saturday. No, it was impossible.

Zirlich sadly removed his trousers and hung them up on the nail. Even hunger should know its limits! But hunger knew no limits. They were eating. The philologist clutched his head and quickly put on his trousers.

He knocked politely.

"Come in!"

The Master of Arts cleared his throat, arranged his face into a worldly smile, and entered. They were sitting at the desk, but on the desk, piled with huge sheets of newspapers, there was nothing edible. Even the samovar was gone.

Swine! thought the philologist. They've managed to hide everything away. Bare as a field. Could they have put the samovar into the washstand?

He chewed a little with his lips and tied the laces at his throat into a pretty bow. "Good afternoon, my friends."

"Good afternoon, Professor."

"Listen, my friends . . ." Zirlich puffed out his cheeks and blew up at his own nose. "The point, my good comrades, is . . . You see, dear fellow writers . . . hm . . ."

He looked once again at the table and suddenly noticed the

edge of the bread showing from under the papers. And Zirlich could no longer take his eyes from it, just as a bird cannot take its eyes away from the emerald eyes of a boa constrictor.

"What is it, Zirlich?"

The corner of the black loaf showed with absolute distinctness against the telegrams of the Russian News Agency.

"I am very hungry," Zirlich said quietly. He caught himself. He shook his head and cried gaily, "You know, I am very fond of bread, and I am very fond of tomatoes and cucumbers. I want some tea."

The prose writer turned pale. How careless of them.

"Here, I can offer you a little piece of bread. I've just received my ration. At the artillery courses. As for tomatoes, well, you know . . ."

No, no, he could not have noticed the salad. The salad was camouflaged too well.

The poet smiled with melancholy. "Yes, Zirlich, have a piece of bread. But tomatoes, so help me, we have none. We haven't eaten anything ourselves for three days . . . I mean two."

Zirlich hastily broke off a piece of bread and stuffed it into his mouth.

"Sit down, Zirlich."

Zirlich sat down. His eyes were expressionless, his cheeks bulged as he chewed.

"How are you, Zirlich?"

Zirlich swallowed hard, and his Adam's apple jumped. He shook his head and spread his hands.

"Bad?"

Zirlich nodded and gagged.

"Don't they give you rations at work?"

Zirlich wiped the drops of sweat from his nose with his sleeve. "In extremely limited quantity," he brought out with difficulty, staring at the bread. "Yes, my friends, in very limited quantity. I receive one quarter of the diplomatic ration a month, which constitutes . . . hm . . . if I am not mistaken . . . If you permit me, I'll pinch off another little piece."

"Pinch it off, Zirlich," the prose writer said through clenched teeth. "Pinch it off. Why not?"

"Thanks, fellows . . ."

"A man should write propaganda plays, Zirlich, that's what one should do," the poet said gloomily, opening the wardrobe. In the huge, empty, echoing wardrobe hung a pair of new, blue, very beautiful trousers. "You see?"

"I see, a pair of trousers."

"There you are, trousers! Blue. Beautiful. New. A masterpiece, you might say."

"You bought them?"

"I bought them. Today. Yes. And so I say—a man should write plays, Zirlich."

Zirlich raised his eyebrows. "They buy them?"

"Oho, and how they buy them! Just write them!"

Zirlich became very agitated. "But do you know, that's an ideal Propaganda?"

"Propaganda."

"Seriously?"

"Couldn't be more serious. You saw the trousers?"

"It's an idea, friends! Only, how shall I put it, I'm not sufficiently experienced in the dramatic form. Of course, it is possible to reconstruct a thing or two from memory. I am thinking of Molière's theater, in the history of French—"

"No history, Zirlich! To the devil with Molière!"

"My dear friends, really, it's an idea!" Zirlich exclaimed with joy. "But you must help me a little, brothers."

"All right, we'll help."

"But what does one write about?"

"About hunger. But make it simple. One, two, three."

Zirlich excitedly finished the bread, looked with admiration at the beautiful trousers, blew at his nose, and went off to write the play.

All night the prose writer and the poet heard the rustling of paper, the scraping of a pen, puffing, panting, and the pattering of

bare heels in the next room. Zirlich was writing. At dawn he politely knocked at the door. He was admitted.

He waved his pen excitedly and an inkspot settled on his trousers. "Forgive me for disturbing you. The play must be uncomplicated?"

"Uncomplicated. The simpler the better."

"You have no bread, my friends?"

"None."

Zirlich stood a while, shifting from one foot to the other, then he left. Zirlich wrote all morning, all day, and all evening. Hunger made his ears hum, and magnetic needles twitched before his eyes. They were eating cucumbers and round onions. At night Zirlich loudly knocked at the door.

"Come in."

He came in. In his hands fluttered a sheaf of paper covered with writing. In high excitement, he sat down on the window sill, took a piece of bread from the table, put it into his mouth, and said, chewing, "I've written a play, fellows. I want to read it to you."

"Is it long?"

"Short. One act."

"Read, Zirlich."

And Zirlich read his play. The play was as follows: a vast, hungry steppe; railroad tracks in the distance; an abandoned baby, five months old, in the midst of the steppe. A crow flies over the baby; wolves, a dogess, and a gopher circle around it; and on the ground beside it crawls a wise snake. The above-mentioned animals conduct a dialogue in the spirit of Maeterlinck on the subjects of hunger, the abandoned infant, and the lack of political consciousness in society. The wolf wants to eat up the baby. The snake reproaches him for cruelty. The gopher weeps. The crow prophesies imminent deliverance. The dogess begins to feed the baby from her own breast. Then a train arrives. The locomotive flashes its fiery eyes. A nurse emerges from the long row of hospital cars. She is not too late! The infant is saved. The wolf lopes off. The snake is triumphant. The hospital train bears the inscription: "All

as one to the aid of the hungry population of the Volga region."

Zirlich finished reading his play, put the manuscript on the table, and looked with feverish eyes at his listeners. "Well, comrades, what do you say?"

The poet hid his eyes. "What can I tell you, Zirlich? It's a play, as plays go. A good play. The concept is interesting, but . . ."

Zirlich felt a chill.

"Yes, Zirlich, the idea is interesting, but it would be difficult to produce."

"Do you think so?" asked Zirlich, blowing up at his nose.

"Yes, I think so. Look, you have a whole hospital train in it!"

Zirlich imploringly untied the laces at his throat. "But it's only a set. Of cardboard, you know. It's only painted!"

"All right, let us suppose the train can be managed. But the infant, the infant! How can you bring a three-month-old baby into a play, Zirlich?"

Zirlich threw back his head. "It's five months old, and besides it doesn't speak. It is a silent role, you see. They can even use a doll, just make one up for the part."

"Hmm, perhaps, if you use a doll. And what of the wolf and the dogess? Why did you bring them in? And incidentally, why a dogess? What sort of animal is a dogess?"

"'Dogess' is feminine for 'dog'—an ancient usage, a Slavicism."

"I see. A Slavicism! But who will agree to play a dogess, did you think of that?"

"I thought of it. He'll use stage makeup; he'll get down on all fours and walk around that way. Oh, that's a point I've given very careful thought."

"Very well, let us say it will pass. But the crow, the crow! How can the crow be played? And then you make it fly in your play, Zirlich!"

Zirlich was silent for a long while, then he said in a flat voice, "And what about Rostand, in *Chantecler*? He has hens in the play. And I have a crow. After all, the difference is not so great?"

"No, not so great. All right. That can still pass. The crow, the gopher—it is not too important, after all. But the snake? Zirlich,

just think about it—a snake! Do you understand it—a snake on the stage! That's impossible. The snake kills the whole thing. The Department of Political Education will never buy a snake."

Zirlich broke into a beady sweat. He whispered hoarsely, "Yes. I never took the snake into account."

A painful silence followed.

"So what is to be done, my friends?"

"Throw out the snake; replace it with something else."

"No! Impossible. Without the snake, the whole composition falls apart. The snake is the reasoning element." Zirlich wilted gloomily. "But maybe," he said, scratching his nose and dully staring at the ceiling with his dusty eyes, "maybe . . . somehow . . . they can make a snake from a fire hose. . . . And have the prompter . . . speak for it? What do you think, fellows?"

"No, Zirlich, the snake won't do."

The poet glanced at the table. There was nothing edible on the table. The table was piled with newspapers.

"Try to write something else, Zirlich."

"I'll have to try. Good night, my friends. . . . I'll go and try."

"Try, try. Good night."

Zirlich went to his room, took off his shirt and his trousers, sat down on the striped mattress, and clutched his head. He felt dizzy. He had no strength. They were eating. Zirlich stole up to the keyhole. On the table stood a bowl with salad. There was bread. And a round onion. Zirlich returned to his table, pressed the pencil into the bridge of his nose so that it left a violet dot, and sat so for a long time. Then he began to write a new play. He wrote all night. Green wheels were flying before his eyes. His hands dropped. He wanted to eat so much that he felt nauseous. From the courtyard came a smell of roast. He wrote all night, all morning, and half the day. At noon he lay down on the striped mattress and imagined a large piece of bread with butter, a cup of milk, and an omelet. The market was not far; at the market, they sold cabbage soup and fried sausage. At the market, there were plaited breads and milk. He had nothing to sell. Zirlich held his head, sighed, then rose and stole up to the wardrobe, his white, flabby body reflected

like a slanting shadow in the mirror. He heard the tapping of his toenails on the floor, and his heart clattered like a typewriter. He opened the doors. The beautiful trousers hung in the huge wardrobe like a suicide in a vast and empty hall. Zirlich did not think about the sin of stealing; he forgot that he was a Master of Arts, that he could read, write, and speak many languages. Zirlich thought only of how much he would get for the trousers; he also thought that he would get a beating if he were caught.

Zirlich felt very ashamed selling the stolen trousers. But after that, he walked about in the market for two hours—eating. He ate bread and onions; he ate cabbage soup with cream and sausage made of dogmeat; he drank milk and smoked cigarettes.

When he was full to repletion, Zirlich cautiously made his way back to his room and sewed into his striped mattress three pounds of bread, a hundred cigarettes, and a large number of cucumbers and onions. He removed his shirt with the laces and his trousers with the stamp of the automobile transport depot and hung them on the nail. After that, he sat down cross-legged on the mattress and devoted himself to Apuleius.

In the evening, they came home and ate. They were probably eating round onions and bread, but it was unimportant. After a while, without hurrying, Zirlich put on his trousers, assumed a suffering mien, and knocked.

He heard the sounds of panic behind the door, and two minutes later he was admitted.

There was nothing edible on the table. It was piled with newspapers.

"Look, my friends . . . I mean . . . I am very hungry. Can you give me a little piece of bread?"

"Alas, Zirlich," sighed the prose writer.

"Well, if you have none, you have none," Zirlich shrugged sadly.

"You must write a play, dear fellow! A play!" the poet pronounced gloomily and went to the wardrobe. "Here, if you please! take a look. Such a pair of trousers. A beauty!"

And he opened the wardrobe.

Zirlich was tying the laces at his throat with a sorrowful air, looking down and off into the corner.

1922

The Suicide

by Valentin Katayev

On the part of the Citizen, it was a swinish thing to do in every respect.

Nevertheless, he made up his mind to it, especially since suicide was not punishable under the criminal code.

In short, a certain Citizen, disillusioned with Soviet realities, decided to turn his face toward the grave.

It's sad, but it is a fact.

He hurriedly collected his severance pay and the wages due him for the vacation he had not taken. Then he penned a feverish note to the Local Committee, bought a large and beautiful nail, a piece of toilet soap, and three yards of rope at the government store, and went home. There he pushed a chair over to the wall and climbed up.

Cr-rash!

"The devil! What a seat! It can't even support the weight of a young, intellectual suicide. And they keep talking of their fight for quality! They call themselves the Wood Manufacturing Trust! Phooey!"

But the Citizen was not a man to bow before the blows of fate, which is nothing but the theory of probabilities, anyway, nothing more!

He managed somehow to climb up on the windowsill, held the nail against the wall, and hit it with a paperweight.

Cr-rash!

"Some nail! In pieces! Their fight for quality, indeed! A decent man has nothing to hang himself on, may the Lord forgive me! I'll have to tie the rope directly to the chandelier. At least that's still a product of the old regime! It will not let me down!"

The Citizen tied the rope to the chandelier, tied an elegant noose, and began to soap it. "Some soap, I'll tell you! First, it does not lather; second, it smells of goat, if you'll pardon the expression, instead of lilies of the valley. It even makes you sick to hang yourself with it."

Suppressing his disgust, the Citizen put his head into the noose and jumped off into the unknown.

Cr-r-rash!

"A million curses on it! Broke, the beastly thing! It dares to call itself a rope! In the most interesting spot, too. Take a look for yourself. . . . Quality! I'll say!"

"To hell with it! Let me try something simpler. Ah! A kitchen knife. 'Will I fall,' as the song says, 'pierced by the arrow, or is it going to fly past?'"

Cr-r-r-rash!

The arrow flew past indeed: the handle in one direction, the blade in another.

The Citizen burst into wild laughter. "You may be sure! Ha-ha-ha! Quality! Well, how can you keep from killing yourself after all that?"

"To die is to die! To hell with the knife, that relic of rotten medieval romanticism! Experienced suicides say that matches can be very, very useful for suicide. You grind up fifty matchheads into a glass, drink them down—and Eureka! An excellent idea. How come I didn't think of it before?"

His spirits restored, the Citizen opened a fresh box of matches

and merrily began to snap off their heads. "One, two, three, ten, twenty. . . . Hm . . . there are only twenty-eight matches in the box, and there should be sixty."

The Citizen broke into muffled sobs. "Comrades, dear friends! What is this? I can understand if they say quality. But where is it written that an honest Soviet citizen should suffer like this over quantity?"

"To the devil with matches! I'll bang my head with all my might against the wall, and that's that. With our own heads, as the slogan goes, we'll push our way toward our goal!"

The Citizen closed his eyes, took a running start, and—

Cr-r-rash!

The solid wall of the brand-new cottage cracked wide open, and the Citizen flew out into the street. "Well, well! *Merci!* Hurrah for quality which is quantity! Hurrah! Ha-ha-ha!"

Nevertheless, he did not lose his mind and was not taken to a hospital.

The Citizen looked at the jar and sighed with relief. "There. At last! Exactly what I need. Acetic acid. Now, this will surely work. I beg to state that no one is to be held responsible for my death . . ."

The Citizen greedily brought the jar to his fevered lips and gulped down its contents. "Hm! A pleasant beverage! Like grape wine, only milder. Shall I try another?"

The Citizen drained a second jar, grunted with pleasure, and waved his fingers before his face. "A piece of sausage would be just the thing now. Or some caviar. . . . And I was trying to kill myself, like a fool. Life is so beautiful! There's quality for you! Marya, my dear, run down and bring me two more jars of acetic acid—and don't forget some sausage. I've worked up a devilish appetite."

"Well, and now, after our little snack, we can sit back and dream a bit about the joys of liv— But what is this? What's hap-

pening in my stomach? Oh, and my eyes! It's turning dark. . . . The sausage, it's the sausage! My friends, I've fallen in the battle with quality! And life is so beau . . ."

And with those final words, the Citizen lay down with his belly up and died.

Which, however, was exactly what he had been after to begin with.

1922-1925

A Goat in the Orchard

by Valentin Katayev

An enormous unshaven man in a sinister-looking tailcoat clambered up onto the stage of a provincial club.

After loudly clearing his throat he asked in a hoarse whisper, "But where is the accompanist?"

"Why, comrade lecturer," said Sasha anxiously, "this is a lecture on home brew, on *samogon*. And our fight against it. What do you want music for?"

"A lecture? Hm. . . . And maybe I'd better sing something, eh? Something, say, from the *Demon*?"

"Ho-ho! But this is a lecture!"

"Honest, I'd rather sing. So help me. . . . Something . . . you know . . ."

"On . . . the earth all hu-oo-man-kind
Wo-hor-ships one divi-hi-ni . . ."

"But please, please! This is a lecture. Anti-*samogon* and temperance and such. . . . That's what the announcement says."

"Really? Oh, well. Hm, hml!"

The man in the tailcoat let out a deep cough, put his hand on his throat, shook his head, and stood in position.

The chairman rang the bell. "Comrades, you are called to order. Our comrade from the Center will talk on the subject of home brew, and so on, and so forth. The subject is most important in social significance for workers, and if there's any that prefer dancing, they can leave the hall right now. The comrade from the Center has the floor."

The lecturer looked around him with pale, bluish eyes, bent forward, and said, "Comrades! At this dire hour, when the Soviet Republic groans before the machinations of the hirelings of world capitalism, we cannot remain indifferent. All as one! Am I right?"

"Right," disapprovingly affirmed the audience.

"Yes, comrades! We, all of us to a man, must join in the fight against home brew. Thousands of people drink it, and thousands of people are poisoned every day by this harmful poison that destroys the organism. Am I right?"

"Some get blind, too," said a brisk female voice from the hall.

"Cor-rect, citizen! A v-very apt remark. Exactly, they get blind. It happens. And deaf. Hon-est. . . . And so, comrades, we see that home brew is a terrible poison and a scourge. And why?"

The lecturer gave the hushed audience an annihilating look. "And wh-hy?"

He held out an effective pause. Then, after savoring the silence to the full, he raised his voice: "And the reason, dear comrades, why home brew is so harmful is that we haven't learned as yet to purify it properly. And what can be simpler than to purify home brew? It's a cinch. To one pail of brew, take three pounds of common, ordinary, completely unremarkable salt—"

"Coarse or fine?" quickly asked someone in the hall.

"Fine is best. But, of course, you can use coarse salt, too. Well, then, you put this salt into the brew and cover the pail with something warm. A blanket, say."

"Will a pillow do, comrade lecturer?"

"You can use a pillow, too. It's even better with a pillow. Yes, dear comrades. Then take, say, five or six pounds of plain, elementary cranberries—"

"Cranberries!" ecstatically shrieked a woman in the third row, slapping her thighs. "Well, I never! Cranberries!"

"Exactly, cranberries," triumphantly exclaimed the lecturer.

"Plain, simple cranberries; then cook said cranberries on a slow fire, adding some yeast, chalk, and soda!"

"A lot of yeast?"

"And soda?"

"Comrade lecturer, and what if—"

"Easy! Easy! Let us hear. Don't push. How much yeast should you add?"

The hall was in an uproar. The people in the rear pushed those in front. Women squealed. Notes flew to the stage.

"Comrades, not all at once! Order, please. This note asks: 'Can you add some pepper and tobacco to the brew to make it stronger?' I answer: Of course not! Pepper and tobacco do create an impression of strength when added to the home brew, but in reality they do not make it stronger, and your head aches like the devil afterwards. Well, then . . . I continue. And so, dear comrades, when the cranberries are thoroughly cooked and discharge their juice, take a strainer, the simplest, most primitive kitchen strainer, which—"

The chairman was pale. "Comrade lecturer, a little nearer to the subject, please."

The public roared: "Let him speak! We demand, we demand! Don't interfere! How much soda? Ground chalk or in lumps? Let him tell again about the strainer."

The lecturer, with lowered head and half-closed eyes, continued. "Then, dear comrades, rub this whole business through the strainer into a recipient . . ."

"Sip it! Oh, Lord, sip it already?"

"Isn't that something?"

". . . into a clay recipient, where you have first put . . ."

The Struggle Unto Death

The chairman clutched his head and bounded off backstage. Sasha stood leaning his cold, sweaty forehead against the window.

"Sasha," the chairman howled in anguish, "he is demoralizing the audience. He doesn't look like a doctor, either. Maybe you made a mistake and brought somebody else?"

"I made no mistake," said Sasha dully. "I went to the hotel myself, room number 8."

The chairman began to tremble. "It was 18, not 8! Help! Drag him from the stage! Not 8—18! Curtain! Curtain! You've got it all mixed up. The fellow in 8 is an actor. Blockhead!"

Sasha convulsively pulled at the curtain.

But it was too late. The lecturer was now standing in the middle of the hall, surrounded by the enthusiastic audience and answering the notes.

The chairman bent down and peered through a slit in the curtain. For a moment his face expressed despair. Then it brightened. Anxiously he swung forward and suddenly shouted hoarsely into the hall, "Comrade lecturer! And what, for instance, if you put too much yeast into the brew and it thickens, the scurvy thing?"

And with these words, he plunged into the thick of the knowledge-seeking crowd.

1925

The Struggle Unto Death

by Valentin Katayev

The director opened the newspaper and a cold shiver ran down his spine. "Call the secretary!" he cried hoarsely into space, pressing his clenched fists to his temples.

"You wanted me, sir?" the secretary asked, delicately sidling into the office.

"I did. Sit down. Did you read?"

"I did, sir," the secretary sighed politely.

"Well, what do you think of it?"

"I think, sir, that it must be fought, sir."

"Bureaucracy?"

"Bureaucracy, sir. Yes, sir."

"Right! Exactly! It must be fought. We must fight bureaucracy. Or what does it come to, comrades! It is outrageous, comrades! The young Soviet apparatus is permeated, comrades, by the old-style, moldy, malodorous red tape and bureaucracy, and we are sitting here and paying no attention! It's a hell of a thing, comrades, if you'll pardon the expression! Even newspapers are talking about it. In short, we must take the most resolute steps to extirpate bureaucracy! Root and stock! Am I right?"

"You're right, sir. It's the holy truth, sir."

"There! You will take care of it, comrade secretary, issue instructions. There must be no more bureaucracy. Starting right now. It's a crash assignment. Urgently—immediately—personally. . . . No admission without permission. . . . I mean, what the devil! What am I saying? My head is going round. . . . That's all we need, to have them come and find bureaucracy in our organization. And whose fault will it be? It's impossible, comrades! You'll run me into the ground, comrades. Don't you understand?"

"I understand, sir."

"Go to work at once, my dear man! Draw up a plan for the immediate extirpation of bureaucracy, then submit it for signature to my deputy and to me; correlate, coordinate, process it; multiply it, mail it out, post it up, get the receipts. Handshakes are abolished, no admission without permission, the throwing of cigarette butts on the floor strictly prohibited. . . . I mean, hell! . . . What am I saying! I'm getting all mixed up. In a word, get to work on it!"

"Yes, sir."

"Coordinated?"

"Coordinated, sir."

"Correlated?"

"Correlated, sir."

"Ventilated?"

"Ventilated, sir."

"Duly processed?"

"Duly processed, sir."

"Did my deputy sign it?"

"No, sir."

"And wh-hy?"

"Because, sir, he is on vacation, sir."

"On vacation? Hm. . . . And who is deputized to take his place?"

"You, sir, you are deputized, sir."

"I?"

"Yes, sir."

"Hm. . . . In that case, give me the plan. I'll look it over and sign it as the deputy, then you will register the signature and submit it to me as the director. Is that clear?"

"It's clear, sir."

"Very well, go on."

"Comrade deputy director, here is a little plan that needs to be looked over and signed, sir."

"What plan?"

"Concerning the struggle against bureaucracy, sir."

"Good. Leave it. I'll look it over."

"Yes, sir."

"Well, did my deputy sign the plan?"

"No, sir. He told me to leave it. He promised to look it over, sir."

"Outrageous! Red tape! Bureaucracy! I shall write him a memorandum at once on the inadmissibility of such outrageous red tape in a matter of nationwide importance. Take the memorandum. Put it through the records department. Stamp it and take it to my deputy. Get his receipt."

"You mean yours?"

"Not mine, my deputy's."

"But you are the deputy of your deputy, sir."

"Silence! I know! In private life I may be I, but officially I am not only I, but also my own deputy and the deputy of my own deputy. Is that clear?"

"Very clear, sir."

"Comrade deputy, a memorandum to you from the director."

"Give it to me. Leave it. I shall look it over at home."

"Did my deputy read the memorandum?"

"No, sir, he didn't, sir. He kept it. He promised to look it over at home."

"The scoundrell! Call him here."

"But, sir . . . how . . . sir, if you and he, sir . . . are one and the same person, sir?"

"Silence! Officially there can be no such thing as one and the same person. Here all persons are official! Call him!"

"Yes, sir. Comrade deputy, the comrade director wants to see you, sir."

"Tell him I'm coming."

"They asked me to say, comrade director, sir, that they will come at once, sir!"

"Very well, you may go."

An hour later, the visitors who stood in a long queue outside the director's office heard the loud voice of the director in angry conversation with himself:

"Is it correlated?"

"It's correlated."

"Coordinated?"

"Coordinated."

"Processed?"

"Processed."

"Did you sign it?"

"I did not sign it."

"Why?"

"Because you should sign it first."

"I am your superior! I will not sign first! You must sign first!"

"I will not!"

"I will dismiss you."

"And I will complain!"

"You wretched bureaucrat!"

"Look who is talking! Miserable red-tapist!"

"What's going on?" the visitors asked the messenger, Nikita.

"Oh, that's our director, fighting bureaucracy."

And from behind the doors of the office came wild shrieks:

"First priority! Most urgent! Incoming and outgoing! Coordinate, correlate, process, verify. No admission without permission, butts on the floor strictly prohibited, no advances issued! . . . Ha-ha-ha-ha. . . ."