

# **THE WRITING LESSON**

Frank J. Morlock

# Table of Contents

<u>THE WRITING LESSON</u> .....	1
<u>Frank J. Morlock</u> .....	1

# THE WRITING LESSON

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Etext by Dagny

Suggested by a story by Il'f and Petrov

## CHARACTERS:

The editor, a person of middle age

The writer, somewhat younger

## THE SCENE:

The editor's office. Moscow in the 1930s.

The offices of the magazine Adventure. It is small, shabby, and decorated only with a large, smiling portrait of Chairman Stalin at his most beneficent. There is a samovar. The window looks out on the Kremlin. Everything is cozy, the editor is a most pompous person, easily agitated and probably not very competent. He is looking over some manuscripts which he throws down in disgust.

### **Editor**

Nobody can write these days, but every scribbler in Moscow is writing. And I have to read it!

(There is a timid knock at the door.)

### **Editor**

Come in, come in.

(The writer enters. He is a man in his twenties, intellectual and timid.)

### **Writer**

Excuse me, Comrade Editor. I

### **Editor**

Well, what do you want? I'm sorry, but I rejected your novel. Perhaps with work, but

### **Writer**

But I

## THE WRITING LESSON

**Editor**

What do you want from me? I can't publish something like that. And I I don't give writing lessons.

**Writer**

But

**Editor**

But what? Can't you see I'm busy. Get out!

**Writer**

But, you sent for me.

**Editor**

Forgive me, Constantine Demitrovich, forgive me. I thought it was one of those scribblers who constantly keep sending me manuscripts. I have never had the pleasure of meeting you before. Please, please. A distinguished writer such as yourself, you must never think Sit down, sit down. Will you have tea or Vodka?

**Writer**

Vodka, if you don't mind.

**Editor**

Champagne for you, Constantine Demitrovich if I could get any. But, Vodka it is. (pours drinks) Skol! (they both swill down their drinks) Another? (pours more drinks) Skol!

**Writer**

Good Vodka. But, if I may ask?

**Editor**

Of course, of course, to business, eh? Comrade writer, you must understand that we have simply run out of fresh interesting material to print in our magazine.

**Writer**

Comrade editor, I

**Editor**

Exactly, Comrade writer, exactly. Adventure magazine is the leading publication for Soviet youth. We maintain the highest standards here. But the trash we've been receiving lately So, we call on you.

**Writer**

Comrade editor,

**Editor**

You're perfectly right. Our literature is too didactic. We need something

**Writer**

Original.

**Editor**

Gripping.

## THE WRITING LESSON

**Writer**

From the life of the people.

**Editor**

In short, a Soviet Robinson Crusoe.

**Writer**

Robinson Crusoe?

**Editor**

Comrade writer, you have a bad habit of repeating everything I say, not to mention interrupting.

**Writer**

Comrade editor

**Editor**

Do you think you can manage it?

**Writer**

I

**Editor**

Of course you can do it. You are a Stalin Prize winner.

**Writer**

I

**Editor**

Don't pretend you're suffering from writer's cramp. When the Party calls you must respond.

**Writer**

I

**Editor**

Please stop interrupting.

**Writer** (furious)

I CAN DO IT!

**Editor**

Well, why didn't you say so, Comrade? You beat around the bush so much. This may be the most difficult, significant book that you have ever written.

**Writer**

It seems to me that plagiarizing Robinson Crusoe ought to be easy.

**Editor**

But not just any Robinson Crusoe.

**Writer**

Robinson Crusoe is Robinson Crusoe.

## THE WRITING LESSON

**Editor**

It must be a Soviet Robinson Crusoe.

**Writer**

All right, all right. What do you expect, a Rumanian Robinson Crusoe?

**Editor**

Ha, ah. A Rumanian Robinson Crusoe! I'll drink to that. Skol! You writers must have your little jokes.

**Writer**

Here it is. A Soviet youth is shipwrecked. A wave washes him ashore on a desert island. He finds himself alone, defenseless face to face with the hostile powers of nature.

**Editor**

I like it. I like it.

**Writer**

He is beset with dangers, wild animals, snakes, the monsoon.

**Editor**

Good, good.

**Writer**

But the Soviet Robinson Crusoe overcomes every insuperable obstacle.

**Editor** (excitedly)

Form studying the thoughts of Comrade Stalin and the teachings of the Party.

**Writer** (gulping)

Right, right, Comrade editor. Three years later, he is found by a Soviet expedition, bursting with life and health. He has built himself a hut, bred rabbits, and taught a parrot to wake him up with the words: "Attention, attention! Off with your blanket, time for early morning exercises."

**Editor**

This is great stuff. No wonder you won the Stalin Prize. That bit about the rabbits is a stroke of genius. But, you know, I'm not quite clear about your theme.

**Writer**

Man's struggle with nature.

**Editor**

That's true, of course, but I don't see anything particularly Soviet about that.

**Writer** (in some desperation)

What about the parrot? He takes the place of radio propaganda broadcasts. Radio Moscow, so to speak.

**Editor**

The parrot is brilliant. Brilliant. But, where is the sense of Soviet Community Life.

**Writer** (incredulously)

On an uninhabited island?

## THE WRITING LESSON

**Editor**

And the local trade union committee?

**Writer**

What?

**Editor**

The guiding light of the trade unions is the heart of Soviet policy! I have no literary pretensions myself, but in your place, Comrade writer, I would insinuate the idea of a local trade union committee.

**Writer**

Insinuate insinuate, but the whole idea of the book is based on the idea of isolation.

**Editor**

Don't be so literal. There's got to be a way to do it. We are paying you for your ingenuity and imagination.

**Writer**

All right, all right. Why didn't I see that before? There must be two survivors of the shipwreck. Robinson Crusoe and the president of the local trade union committee.

**Writer**

And two full time trade union workers.

**Writer**

Help!

**Editor**

And one female activist in charge of collecting membership dues.

**Writer**

How can she collect membership dues when they don't have any money?

**Editor**

Maybe they use wampum or something. Anyway, she can collect Robinson Crusoe's dues.

**Writer**

The president can collect Robinson Crusoe's dues.

**Editor**

That's where you're wrong, Comrade writer. The president can't be allowed to occupy himself with such trifles. He must devote himself to serious work, guiding and leading.

**Writer**

Well, better have her, then. Maybe it's not a bad idea. A little love interest. She can marry Robinson Crusoe or the president. That's it! They fight over her.

**Editor**

Absolutely not! Adventure is a wholesome magazine designed for young readers. No cheap bourgeois romance or unhealthy eroticism. Just let her collect membership dues and keep them in her safe.

## THE WRITING LESSON

**Writer**

Please, Comrade editor, there cannot be a safe on an uninhabited island.

**Editor**

Why not?

**Writer**

Why not?

**Editor**

Why not?

**Writer** (livid)

Because it's ridiculous, that's why not.

**Editor** (icily)

A safe is absolutely essential.

**Writer**

For God's sake, why?

**Editor** (as to a child)

So no one will steal the membership dues.

**Writer**

But, who will steal the funds?

**Editor**

What about Robinson Crusoe, the president of the committee, the two workers, or the saboteurs?

**Writer** (dangerously)

The saboteurs?

**Editor** (complacently)

Certainly. The anti-party faction. The wreckers. The Kulaks. The remnants of the old aristocracy.

**Writer**

But

**Editor**

I don't want to inhibit your creativity. These are just suggestions

**Writer**

Of course.

**Editor**

The Party encourages the highest standards of literary merit. But, the first thing, lad, is to depict the masses. The broad stratum of Soviet workers. You can't leave that out.

**Writer**

BUT THE ISLAND IS UNINHABITED!



## THE WRITING LESSON

**Editor**

Why does it have to be uninhabited? Don't confuse everything. There's this big island or better yet, a subcontinent, and on it there takes place this series of gripping and original adventures. Right from Robinson Crusoe, of course. The trade union is not well organized, and the female activist discovers a series of discrepancies. The president is stealing the dues. And the broad masses come to her aid. There's your story, young man!

**Writer**

What about Robinson Crusoe?

**Editor**

Get rid of him. He's ruining the whole story.

**Writer**

But

**Editor**

And that shipwreck is quite unnecessary. Let's do it without the shipwreck.

**Writer**

Can we have a murder?

**Editor**

A murder?

**Writer**

Yes.

**Editor**

Whose?

**Writer** (pouncing on him and choking him to death gleefully)

Yours! It will add suspense. You see, the saboteur, or make that the Kulak murders the president of the local committee. How's that for a surprise ending.

(The writer releases the limp body of the editor. He picks up his hat and goes towards the door. Suddenly the editor sits up and whistles.)

**Editor**

Great, great, Comrade! But, realism, realism. Socialist realism. This is petty bourgeois fantasy and romanticism. No, no. In real life, in Soviet life, the NKVD comes and arrests the writer for bourgeois deviationism.

(Stalin smiles as the curtain falls.)

CURTAIN