



Mikhail Mikhailovich Zoshchenko (1895–1958) was a writer of comic short stories that starkly satirized the quirks and hardships of Soviet daily life. He was born in Poltava, in present-day Ukraine, but spent most of his life in St. Petersburg/Leningrad. His father was an artist of noble origin; his mother was an actress. When World War I broke out, he was studying law at the University of St. Petersburg. In 1915, after training in a military school, Zoshchenko went to the front lines and took part in battle. He was gassed and wounded several times, and awarded four medals for his efforts. As a supporter of the October Revolution, he joined the Red Army in 1918 but was released as physically unfit in 1919.

The next three years, he changed jobs many times, embracing the varied experience and acquiring potential literary material. In 1922, he became an active member of the literary group “Serapion Brothers”—a community of writers who tried to distance art from politics. Zoshchenko’s early stories dealt with his experiences in the First World War and the Russian Civil War. He gradually developed a style that relied heavily on humor. In 1922–28, he published in seven different satirical magazines in Moscow and Leningrad that had a combined print run of over half a million copies, approximately equal to the daily circulation of the official Communist Party newspaper, *Pravda*. Zoshchenko’s stories achieved enormous popularity almost overnight. He became a household word, so that people could say “like something out of Zoshchenko” and understand at once the wry view of life to which they were referring. His enormous popularity can be attributed to his simple writing style, use of colloquial language/slang and the timely subject matter of his stories, to which many people could relate. The masses of people who had migrated from the countryside to major cities after the revolution in search of work, faced problems similar to those of

Zoshchenko's characters: confusion over the new Marxist political vocabulary, housing shortages, and poor quality of consumer goods.

Though Zoshchenko never directly attacked the Soviet system, in the 1930s he was, nevertheless, under great pressure to conform to ideas of Socialist realism. His works written in this period—*The Story of One Reforging* and *Stories About Lenin* written for children—are serious in tone and lack any of Zoshchenko's characteristic flavor. He also published the ambiguous experimental works *Youth Restored* (1933) and *The Sky-Blue Book* (1935).

Disillusioned with Communist ideals after the first wave of Stalinist terror and purges, he began to exploit an imaginatively oblique new literary form in which theoretical arguments were illustrated by fictional stories. In 1943, he published the first installment of his autobiographical work *Before Sunrise*. *Before Sunrise* was banned, and, three years later, Zoshchenko's literary career was brought to an end. After the publication of *The Adventures of a Monkey* in the literary magazine *The Star*, Zoshchenko was labeled by the state as a vulgar writer of unwholesome ideas and expelled from the Soviet Writers' Union. Expulsion from the writers' club soon resulted in loss of work and no further publication of his writing. He earned a pittance from translation work and other odd jobs until after Stalin's death, when he was gradually rehabilitated. He died in 1958.

"Nervous People," written in 1924, emphasizes the worst aspects of the communal apartment—a favorite target of Zoshchenko's satirical works. Zoshchenko provides the most original and perceptive type of *skaz* in his story about conflicts among strangers forced to share close quarters with a communal kitchen and bathroom.

His story "The Bathhouse" (1925) comes across as a humorous documentation of the realities of a country in a state of poverty, in a society where widespread theft, bribery and corruption conflict with declared ideals of socialist society. Aptly, this tale recounts how in the bathhouse men find themselves without the

materials they need to wash, with no place to put their tickets, and with a constant threat of their clothes being stolen.

Zoshchenko's style of *skaz* narration has its peculiarities. In his stories, humor is caught in the space between the daft and overly hopeful narrator/IMPLIED author—who the reader can only hope and assume is not so dimwitted. His characters make the kinds of linguistic mistakes so often identified as one of the peculiarities of Zoshchenko's *skaz*, such as parenthetical words and modal particles that not only carry the rhythms of the narrative but also imply sarcasm, secrecy and call attention to the process of the telling. The narrator himself is highly intrusive in the text with his casual and gossipy tone.

Svetlana Malykhina



## Баня



*Михаил Зошенко*

Говорят, граждане, в Америке бани отличные.

Туда, например, гражданин придёт, скинет бельё в особый ящик и пойдёт себе мыться. Беспокоиться даже не будет — мол, кража или пропажа, номерка даже не возьмёт.

Ну, может, иной беспокойный американец и скажет банщику:

— Гуд бай, — дескать, — присмотри.

Только и всего.

Помоется этот американец, назад придёт, а ему чистое бельё подают — стираное и глаженое. Портянки небось белее снега. Подштанники зашиты, залатаны. Житьишко!

А у нас бани тоже ничего. Но хуже. Хотя то же мыться можно.

У нас только с номерками беда. Прошлую субботу я пошёл в баню (не ехать же, думаю, в Америку), — дают два номерка. Один за бельё, другой за пальто с шапкой.

А голому человеку куда номерки деть? Прямо сказать — некуда. Карманов нету. Кругом — живот да ноги. Грех один с номерками. К бороде не привяжешь.

Ну, привязал я к ногам по номерку, чтоб не враз потерять. Вошёл в баню.

Номерки теперича по ногам хлопают. Ходить скучно. А ходить надо. Потому шайку надо. Без шайки какое же мытьё? Грех один.

Ищу шайку. Гляжу, один гражданин в трёх шайках моется. В одной стоит, в другой башку мылит, а третью левой рукой придерживает, чтоб не спёрли.

Потянул я третью шайку, хотел, между прочим, её себе взять, а гражданин не выпускает.



## The Bathhouse



*Mikhail Zoshchenko*

They say, citizens, that the baths in America are excellent.

There, for example, a citizen will come, throw his garments in a special box, and go off to wash himself. He won't even worry, they say, that they'll be stolen or lost, won't even take a claim tag.

Well, maybe the occasional nervous American will say to the bathhouse attendant:

“Good-bye,” he'll say, “watch my things.”

And that's all.

After this American has bathed, he'll return, and they'll give him clean underclothes—washed and pressed. The footcloths, I bet, are as white as snow. Underwear is mended and patched. What a life!

Our bathhouses are also not bad. But worse. Though it's also possible to bathe.

It's just that we have trouble with claim tags. Last Saturday, I went to the bathhouse (wouldn't go to America just for that, I thought)—they gave me two tags. One for my underclothes, another for my coat and hat.

And where is a naked man supposed to put a tag? I'll tell you straight away: nowhere. No pockets. All you have is a belly and legs. It's always an issue with the tags. Can't tie them to your beard.

So, I tie one to each leg, so as not to lose them straight away. I stepped into the washing room.

Now the tags are slapping against my leg. Walking is tedious. But walk I must. Because I need a washbasin. How can you wash without a washbasin? Simply absurd.

I look for a washbasin. I see that one citizen is washing with three basins. He stands in one, soaps up his noggin in another, and the third he holds with his left hand so no one swipes it.

I reach for the third basin, wishing, by the way, to take it for myself, but the citizen doesn't let it go.

— Ты что ж это, — говорит, — чужие шайки воруюешь? Как ляпну, — говорит, — тебе шайкой между глаз — не радуешься.

Я говорю:

— Не царский, — говорю, — режим шайками ляпать. Эгоизм, — говорю, — какой. Надо же, — говорю, — и другим помыться. Не в театре, — говорю.

А он задом повернулся и моется.

“Не стоять же, — думаю, — над его душой. Теперича, — думаю, — он нарочно три дня будет мыться.”

Пошёл дальше.

Через час гляжу, какой-то дядя зазевался, выпустил из рук шайку. За мылом нагнулся или замечтался — не знаю. А только тую шайку я взял себе.

Теперича и шайка есть, а сесть негде. А стоя мыться — какое же мытьё? Грех один.

Хорошо. Стою стоя, держу шайку в руке, моюсь.

А кругом-то, батюшки-светы, стирка самосильно идёт. Один штаны моет, другой подштанники трёт, третий ещё что-то крутит. Только, скажем, вымылся — опять грязный. Брызжут, дьяволы. И шум такой стоит от стирки — мыться неохота. Не слышишь, куда мыло трёшь. Грех один.

“Ну их, — думаю, — в болото. Дома домоюсь.”

Иду в предбанник. Выдают на номер бельё. Гляжу — всё моё, штаны не мои.

— Граждане, — говорю. — На моих тут дырка была. А на этих эвон где.

А банщик говорит:

— Мы, — говорит, — за дырками не приставлены. Не в театре, — говорит.

Хорошо. Надеваю эти штаны, иду за пальто. Пальто не выдают — номерок требуют. А номерок на ноге забытый. Раздеваться надо. Снял штаны, ищу номерок — нету номерка. Верёвка тут, на ноге, а бумажки нет. Смывась бумажка.

“What are you doing,” he says, “stealing someone’s basin? I will,” he says, “clap you with a basin between the eyes—you won’t be so joyful.”

I say:

“This isn’t the Tsarist regime,” I say, “to clap people with basins. Such egoism,” I say. “After all, others have to bathe. We’re not in the theatre,” I say.

But he turned his back to me and continued bathing.

“Can’t just stand here,” I thought, “and breathe down his neck. Now, he will purposefully wash for three whole days.”

I walked on.

An hour later, I see some man gaping at something, letting his hand off of his basin. Reached for soap or lost in a dream, I don’t know. Only I took that basin for myself.

Now, I have a basin, but there is nowhere to sit. And standing to bathe, what kind of a bath is that? Simply absurd.

Fine. I’ll stand. I hold my basin in my hand and bathe.

All around me—good heavens—it’s a regular laundry. One is washing his trousers, another rubbing his underwear, a third wringing something else. No sooner than I finish washing, let’s say—I’m dirty already. Splashing at me, the devils. And such noise from their washing—I don’t even feel like bathing. Can’t hear where the soap lathers. Simply absurd.

“Well,” I think, “To hell with this. I’ll finish washing at home.”

I walk to the dressing room where we give back our tags for our garments. I look—everything is mine, except the trousers.

“Citizen,” I say, “my trousers had a hole over here. But these have a hole over here.”

The attendant says:

“We are not here to watch over holes. You’re not in the theatre,” he says.

Fine. I put on these trousers and go to get my coat. They won’t give me my coat—they demand my tag. But I forgot my tag on my leg. I must undress. I take off my trousers, I search for my tag—no tag. The string is here, on my leg, but the paper is gone. The paper washed off.

Подаю банщику верёвку — не хочет.

— По верёвке, — говорит, — не выдаю. Это, — говорит, — каждый гражданин настрижёт верёвок — полт не напа-сёшься. Обожди, — говорит, — когда публика разойдётся — выдам, какое останется.

Я говорю:

— Братишечка, а вдруг да дрянь останется? Не в театре же, — говорю. Выдай, — говорю, — по приметам. Один, — говорю, — карман рваный, другого нету. Что касаемо пуговиц, то, — говорю, — верхняя есть, нижних же не пред-видится.

Всё-таки выдал. И верёвки не взял.

Оделся я, вышел на улицу. Вдруг вспомнил: мыло забыл.

Вернулся снова. В пальто не впускают.

— Раздевайтесь, — говорят.

Я говорю:

— Я, граждане, не могу в третий раз раздеваться. Не в театре, — говорю. Выдайте тогда хоть стоимость мыла.

Не дают.

Не дают — не надо. Пошёл без мыла.

Конечно, читатель может полюбопытствовать: какая, дескать, это баня? Где она? Адрес?

Какая баня? Обыкновенная. Которая в гривенник.

I give the attendant the string—he doesn't want it.

“We don't give things out,” he says, “for strings. Any citizen can cut up strings—we wouldn't have enough coats for everyone then. Wait around,” he says, “when everyone leaves—I'll give you what is left over.”

I say:

“Brother, what if there's nothing but rags left? We're not in the theatre,” I say. “Give me one according to my description. One pocket,” I say, “is ripped. The other is gone. As far as the buttons go,” I say, “the top one's there, but the bottom ones aren't to be expected.”

In the end, he gave it to me. And didn't take the string.

I put the jacket on and walked out onto the street. Suddenly I remembered: I forgot my soap.

I returned again. They won't let me inside in a coat.

“Get undressed,” they say.

I say:

“I, citizens, cannot undress for a third time. We're not in the theatre,” I say. “Give me back, at least, the cost of the soap.”

They won't give it to me.

They won't give it—no need. I leave without the soap.

Of course, the reader may be interested: which, he'll ask, bathhouse was this? Where is it? Address?

Which bathhouse? A typical one. A ten-kopeck bathhouse.

*Translated by Danielle Jones with Natalya Russkikh.*

### Questions for Discussion:

1. Identify several of the humorous sections of the story. What writing techniques does Zoshchenko use to create these?
2. What comparisons between the Soviet Union and America does Zoshchenko make? Why?
3. What is the point of this episode in the bathhouse? What is the narrator's attitude toward the larger picture? Zoshchenko's?