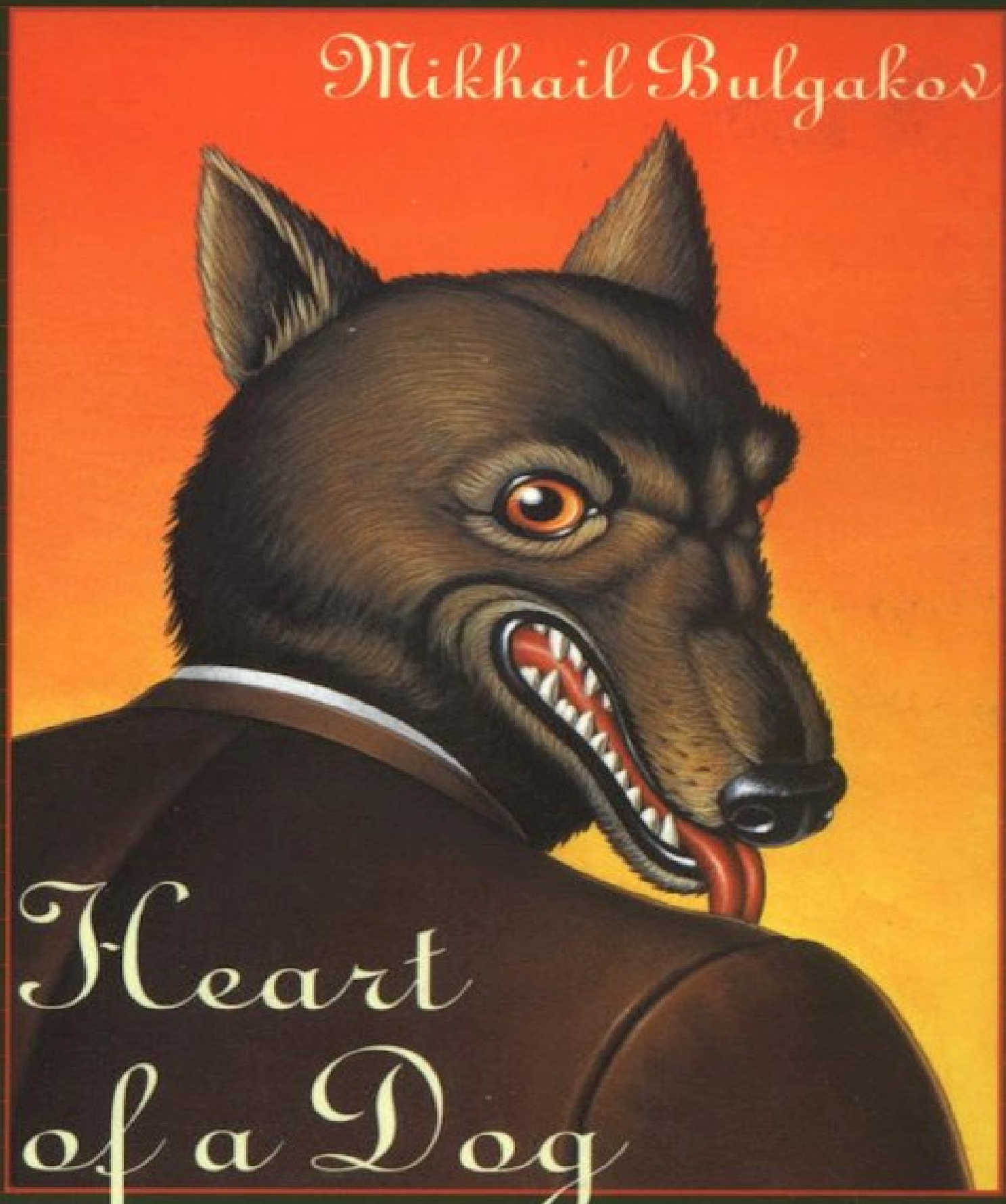
Mikhail Bulgakov



Heart of a Dog

"The author of *The Master and Margarita* and *Heart of a Dog* is one of the few truly great writers produced by the Soviet Union."—*Saturday Review*

Michail Bulgakov

The heart of a dog

One

Ooow-ow-ooow-owow! Oh, look at me, I'm dying. There's a snowstorm moaning a requiem for me in this doorway and I'm howling with it. I'm finished. Some bastard in a dirty white cap - the cook in the office canteen at the National Economic Council - spilled some boiling water and scalded my left side. Filthy swine - and a proletarian, too. Christ, it hurts! That boiling water scalded me right through to the bone. I can howl and howl, but what's the use?

What harm was I doing him, anyway? I'm not robbing the National Economic Council's food supply if I go foraging in their dustbins, am I? Greedy pig! Just take a look at his ugly mug - it's almost fatter than he is. Hard-faced crook. Oh people, people. It was midday when that fool doused me with boiling water, now it's getting dark, must be about four o'clock in the afternoon judging by the smell of onion coming from the Prechistenka fire station. Firemen have soup for supper, you know. Not that I care for it myself. I can manage without soup - don't like mushrooms either. The dogs I know in Prechistenka Street, by the way, tell me there's a restaurant in Neglinny Street where they get the chef's special every day - mushroom stew with relish at 3 roubles and 75 kopecks the portion. All right for connoisseurs, I suppose. I think eating mushrooms is about as tasty as licking a pair of galoshes . . . Oow-owowow . . .

My side hurts like hell and I can see just what's going to become of me. Tomorrow it will break out in ulcers and then how can I make them heal? In summer you can go and roll in Sokolniki Park where there's a special grass that does you good. Besides, you can get a free meal of sausageends and there's plenty of greasy bits of food-wrappings to lick. And if it wasn't for some old groaner singing '0 celeste Aida' out in the moonlight till it makes you sick, the place would be perfect. But where can I go now? Haven't I been kicked around enough? Sure I have. Haven't I had enough bricks

thrown at me? Plenty . . . Still, after what I've been through, I can take a lot. I'm only whining now because of the pain and cold - though I'm not licked yet ... it takes a lot to keep a good dog down.

But my poor old body's been knocked about by people once too often. The trouble is that when that cook doused me with boiling water it scalded through right under my fur and now there's nothing to keep the cold out on my left side. I could easily get pneumonia - and if I get that, citizens, I'll die of hunger. When you get pneumonia the only thing to do is to lie up under someone's front doorstep, and then who's going to run round the dustbins looking for food for a sick bachelor dog? I shall get a chill on my lungs, crawl on my belly till I'm so weak that it'll only need one poke of someone's stick to finish me off. And the dustmen will pick me up by the legs and sling me on to their cart . . .

Dustmen are the lowest form of proletarian life. Humans' rubbish is the filthiest stuff there is. Cooks vary - for instance, there was Vlas from Prechistenka, who's dead now. He saved I don't know how many dogs' lives, because when you're sick you've simply got to be able to eat and keep your strength up. And when Vlas used to throw you a bone there was always a good eighth of an inch of meat on it. He was a great character. God rest his soul, a gentleman's cook who worked for Count Tolstoy's family and not for your stinking Food Rationing Board. As for the muck they dish out there as rations, well it makes even a dog wonder. They make soup out of salt beef that's gone rotten, the cheats. The poor fools who eat there can't tell the difference. It's just grab, gobble and gulp.

A typist on salary scale 9 gets 60 roubles a month. Of course her lover keeps her in silk stockings, but think what she has to put up with in exchange for silk. He won't just want to make the usual sort of love to her, he'll make her do it the French way. They're a lot of bastards, those Frenchmen, if you ask me - though they know how to stuff their guts all right, and red wine with everything. Well, along comes this little typist and wants a meal. She can't afford to go into the restaurant on 60 roubles a month and go to the cinema as well. And the cinema is a woman's one consolation in life. It's agony for her to have to choose a meal . . . just think:40 kopecks for two courses, and neither of them is worth more than 15 because the manager has pocketed the other
25 kopecks-worth. Anyhow, is it the right sort of food for her? She's got a patch on the top of her right lung, she's having her period, she's had her pay

docked at work and they feed her with any old muck at the canteen, poor girl . . . There she goes now, running into the doorway in her lover's stockings. Cold legs, and the wind blows up her belly because even though she has some hair on it like mine she wears such cold, thin, lacy little pants - just to please her lover. If she tried to wear flannel ones he'd soon bawl her out for looking a frump. 'My girl bores me', he'll say, 'I'm fed up with those flannel knickers of hers, to hell with her. I've made good now and all I make in graft goes on women, lobsters and champagne. I went hungry often enough as a kid. So what - you can't take it with you.'

I feel sorry for her, poor thing. But I feel a lot sorrier for myself. I'm not saying it out of selfishness, not a bit, but because you can't compare us. She at least has a warm home to go to, but what about me? . . . Where can I go? Oowow-owow!

'Here, doggy, here, boy! Here, Sharik . . . What are you whining for, poor little fellow? Did somebody hurt you, then?'

The terrible snowstorm howled around the doorway, buffeting the girl's ears. It blew her skirt up to her knees, showing her fawn stockings and a little strip of badly washed lace underwear, drowned her words and covered the dog in snow.

'My God . . . what weather . . . ugh . . . And my stomach aches. It's that awful salt beef. When is all this going to end?'

Lowering her head the girl launched into the attack and rushed out of the doorway. On the street the violent storm spun her like a top, then a whirlwind of snow spiralled around her and she vanished.

But the dog stayed in the doorway. His scalded flank was so painful that he pressed himself against the cold wall, gasping for breath, and decided not to move from the spot. He would die in the doorway. Despair overcame him. He was so bitter and sick at heart, so lonely and terrified that little dog's tears, like pimples, trickled down from his eyes, and at once dried up. His injured side was covered with frozen, dried blood-clots and between them peeped the angry red patches of the scald. All the fault of that vicious, thickheaded, stupid cook. 'Sharik' she had called him . . . What a name to choose! Sharik is the sort of name for a round, fat, stupid dog that's fed on porridge, a dog with a pedigree, and he was a tattered, scraggy, filthy stray mongrel with a scalded side.

Across the street the door of a brightly lit store slammed and a citizen came through it. Not a comrade, but a citizen, or even more likely - a

gentleman. As he came closer it was obvious that he was a gentleman. I suppose you thought I recognised him by his overcoat? Nonsense. Lots of proletarians even wear overcoats nowadays. I admit they don't usually have collars like this one, of course, but even so you can sometimes be mistaken at a distance. No, it's the eyes: you can't go wrong with those, near or far. Eyes mean a lot. Like a barometer. They tell you everything - they tell you who has a heart of stone, who would poke the toe of his boot in your ribs as soon as look at you - and who's afraid of you. The cowards - they're the ones whose ankles I like to snap at. If they're scared, I go for them. Serve them right . . . grrr . . . bow-wow . . .

The gentleman boldly crossed the street in a pillar of whirling snow and headed for the doorway. Yes, you can tell his sort all right. He wouldn't eat rotten salt beef, and if anyone did happen to give him any he'd make a fuss and write to the newspapers - someone has been trying to poison me - me, Philip Philipovich.

He came nearer and nearer. He's the kind who always eats well and never steals, he wouldn't kick you, but he's not afraid of anyone either. And he's never afraid because he always has enough to eat. This man's a brain worker, with a carefully trimmed, sharp-pointed beard and grey moustaches, bold and bushy ones like the knights of old. But the smell of him, that came floating on the wind, was a bad, hospital smell. And cigars.

I wonder why the hell he wants to go into that Co-op? Here he is beside me . . . What does he want? Oowow, owow . . . What would he want to buy in that filthy store, surely he can afford to go to the Okhotny Ryad? What's that he's holding? Sausage. Look sir, if you knew what they put into that sausage you'd never go near that store. Better give it to me.

The dog gathered the last of his strength and crawled fainting out of the doorway on to the pavement. The blizzard boomed like gunfire over his head, flapping a great canvas billboard marked in huge letters, 'Is Rejuvenation Possible?'

Of course it's possible. The mere smell has rejuvenated me, got me up off my belly, sent scorching waves through my stomach that's been empty for two days. The smell that overpowered the hospital smell was the heavenly aroma of minced horsemeat with garlic and pepper. I feel it, I know -there's a sausage in his right-hand coat pocket. He's standing over me. Oh, master! Look at me. I'm dying. I'm so wretched, I'll be your slave for ever!

The dog crawled tearfully forward on his stomach. Look what that cook did to me. You'll never give me anything, though. I know these rich people. What good is it to you? What do you want with a bit of rotten old horsemeat? The Moscow State Food Store only sells muck like that. But you've a good lunch under your belt, haven't you, you're a world-famous figure thanks to male sex glands. Oowow-owow . . . What can I do? I'm too young to die yet and despair's a sin. There's nothing for it, I shall have to lick his hand.

The mysterious gentleman bent down towards the dog, his gold spectacle-rims flashing, and pulled a long white package out of his right-hand coat pocket. Without taking off his tan gloves he broke off a piece of the sausage, which was labelled 'Special Cracower'. And gave it to the dog. Oh,
immaculate personage! Oowow-oowow!
'Here, doggy,' the gentleman whistled, and added sternly, 'Come on! Take it, Sharik!'

He's christened me Sharik too. Call me what you like. For this you can do anything you like to me,

In a moment the dog had ripped off the sausage-skin. Mouth watering, he bit into the Cracower and gobbled it down in two swallows. Tears started to his eyes as he nearly choked on the string, which in his greed he almost swallowed. Let me lick your hand again, I'll kiss your boots - you've saved my life.

'That's enough . . .' The gentleman barked as though giving an order. He bent over Sharik, stared with a searching look into his eyes and unexpectedly stroked the dog gently and intimately along the stomach with his gloved hand.

'Aha,' he pronounced meaningly. 'No collar. Excellent. You're just what I want. Follow me.' He clicked his fingers. 'Good dog!'

Follow you? To the end of the earth. Kick me with your felt boots and I won't say a word.

The street lamps were alight all along Prechistenka Street. His flank hurt unbearably, but for the moment Sharik forgot about it, absorbed by a single thought: how to avoid losing sight of this miraculous fur-coated vision in the hurly-burly of the storm and how to show him his love and devotion. Seven times along the whole length of Prechistenka Street as far as the cross-roads at Obukhov Street he showed it. At Myortvy Street he kissed

his boot, he cleared the way by barking at a lady and frightened her into falling flat on the pavement, and twice he gave a howl to make sure the gentleman still felt sorry for him.

A filthy, thieving stray torn cat slunk out from behind a drainpipe and despite the snowstorm, sniffed the Cracower. Sharik went blind with rage at the thought that this rich eccentric who picked up injured dogs in doorways might take pity on this robber and make him share the sausage. So he bared his teeth so fiercely that the cat, with a hiss like a leaky hosepipe, shinned back up the drainpipe right to the second floor. Grrrr! Woof! Gone! We can't go handing out Moscow State groceries to all the strays loafing about Prechistenka Street.

The gentleman noticed the dog's devotion as they passed the fire station window, out of which came the pleasant sound of a French horn, and rewarded him with a second piece that was an ounce or two smaller.

Queer chap. He's beckoning to me. Don't worry, I'm not going to run away. I'll follow you wherever you like. 'Here, doggy, here, boy!'

Obukhov Street? OK by me. I know the place - I've been around.

'Here, doggy!'

Here? Sure . . . Hey, no, wait a minute. No. There's a porters on that block of flats. My worst enemies, porters, much worse than dustmen. Horrible lot. Worse than cats. Butchers in gold braid.

'Don't be frightened, come on.' 'Good evening, Philip Philipovich.' 'Good evening, Fyodor.'

What a character. I'm in luck, by God. Who is this genius, who can even bring stray dogs off the street past a porter? Look at the bastard - not a move, not a word! He looks grim enough, but he doesn't seem to mind, for all the gold braid on his cap. That's how it should be, too. Knows his place. Yes, I'm with this gentleman, so you can keep your hands to yourself. What's that - did he make a move? Bite him. I wouldn't mind a mouthful of homy proletarian leg. In exchange for the trouble I've had from all the other porters and all the times they've poked a broom in my face.

'Come on, come on.'

OK, OK, don't worry. I'll go wherever you go. Just show me the way. I'll be right behind you. Even if my side does hurt like hell.

From hallway up the staircase: 'Were there any letters for me, Fyodor?'

From below, respectfully: 'No sir, Philip Philipovich' (dropping his voice and adding intimately), 'but they've just moved some more tenants into No.

3.'

The dog's dignified benefactor turned sharply round on the step, leaned over the railing and asked in horror: 'Wh-at?'

His eyes went quite round and his moustache bristled.

The porter looked upwards, put his hand to his lips, nodded and said: 'That's right, four of
them.'

'My God! I can just imagine what it must be like in that apartment now. What sort of people are they?'

'Nobody special, sir.'

'And what's Fyodor Pavolovich doing?'

'He's gone to get some screens and a load of bricks. They're going to build some partitions in the apartment.'

'God - what is the place coming to?'

'Extra tenants are being moved into every apartment, except yours, Philip Philipovich. There was a meeting the other day; they elected a new house committee and kicked out the old one.'

'What will happen next? Oh, God . . .
'Come on, doggy.'
I'm coming as fast as I can. My side is giving me trouble, though. Let me lick your boot. The porter's gold braid disappeared from the lobby.
Past warm radiators on a marble landing, another flight of stairs and then - a mezzanine.

Two

Why bother to leam to read when you can smell meat a mile away? If you live in Moscow,
though, and if you've got an ounce of brain in your head you can't help learning to read -and without going to night-school either. There are forty-thousand dogs in Moscow and I'll bet there's not one of them so stupid he can't spell out the word 'sausage'.

Sharik had begun by learning from colours. When he was just four months old, blue-green signs started appearing all over Moscow with the letters MSFS - Moscow State Food Stores - which meant a butcher and delicatessen. I repeat that he had no need to learn his letters because he could smell the meat anyway. Once he made a bad mistake: trotting up to a bright blue shop-sign one day when the smell was drowned by car exhaust, instead of a butcher's shop he ran into the Polubizner Brothers' electrical goods store on Myasnitzkaya Street. There the brothers taught him all about insulated cable, which can be sharper than a cabman's whip. This famous occasion may be regarded as the beginning of Sharik's education. It was here on the pavement that Sharik began to realise that 'blue' doesn't always mean 'butcher', and as he squeezed his burningly painful tail between his back legs and howled, he remembered that on every butcher's shop the first letter on the left was always gold or brown, bow-legged, and looked like a toboggan.

After that the lessons were rather easier. 'A' he learned from the barber on the comer of Mokhovaya Street, followed by 'B' (there was always a policeman standing in front of the last four letters of the word). Corner shops faced with tiles always meant 'CHEESE' and the black half-moon at the beginning of the word stood for the name of their former owners 'Chichkin'; they were full of mountains of red Dutch cheeses, salesmen who hated dogs, sawdust on the floor and reeking Limburger.

If there was accordion music (which was slightly better than 'Celeste Aida'), and the place smelted of frankfurters, the first letters on the white signboards very conveniently | spelled out the word 'NOOB', which was short for 'No obscene language. No tips.' Sometimes at these places fights would break out, people would start punching each other in the face with their fists - sometimes even with napkins or boots.

If there were stale bits of ham and mandarin oranges in the window it meant a grrr . . . grrocery. If there were black bottles full of evil liquids it was . . . li-li-liquor . . . formerly Eliseyev Bros.

The unknown gentleman had led the dog to the door of his luxurious flat on the mezzanine floor, and rang the doorbell. The dog at once looked up at a big, black, gold-lettered nameplate hanging beside a pink frosted-glass door. He deciphered the first three letters at once: P-R-O- 'Pro . . .', but after tliat there was a funny tall thing with a cross bar which he did not know.

Surely he's not a proletarian? thought Sharik with amazement... He can't be. He lifted up his nose, sniffed the fur coat and said firmly to himself:

No, this doesn't smell proletarian. Some high-falutin' word. God knows what it means.

Suddenly a light flashed on cheerfully behind the pink glass door, throwing the nameplate into even deeper shadow. The door opened soundlessly and a beautiful young woman in a white apron and lace cap stood before the dog and his master. A wave of delicious warmth flowed over the dog and the woman's skirt smelled of carnations.

This I like, thought the dog.

'Come in, Mr Sharik,' said the gentleman ironically and Sharik respectfully obeyed, wagging his tail.

A great multitude of objects filled the richly furnished hall. Beside him was a mirror stretching right down to the floor, which instantly reflected a second dirty, exhausted Sharik. High up on the wall was a terrifying pair of antlers, there were countless fur coats and pairs of galoshes and an electric tulip made of opal glass hanging from the ceiling.

'Where on earth did you get that from, Philip Philipovich?' enquired the woman, smiling as she helped to take off the heavy brown, blue-flecked fox-fur coat.

'God, he looks lousy.'

'Nonsense. He doesn't look lousy to me,' said the gentleman abruptly.

With his fur coat off he was seen to be wearing a black suit of English material; a gold chain across his stomach shone with a dull glow.

'Hold still, boy, keep still doggy . . . keep still you little fool. H'm . . . that's not lice . . . Stand still, will you . . . H'mm . . . aha - yes . . . It's a scald. Who was mean enough to throw boiling water over you, I wonder? Eh? Keep still, will you . . .!'

It was that miserable cook, said the dog with his pitiful eyes and gave a little whimper.

'Zina,' ordered the gentleman, 'take him into the consulting-room at once and get me a white coat.'

The woman whistled, clicked her fingers and the dog followed her slightly hesitantly. Together they walked down a narrow, dimly-lit corridor, passed a varnished door, reached the end then turned left and arrived in a dark little room which the dog instantly disliked for its ominous smell. The