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A DOG'S HEART

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■ RUSSIAN MODERN PROSE ■

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A DOG'S HEART

(A Monstrous Story)

Translated by Antonina W. Bouis

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Chapter 1

Aooooo-ooow-ooow! O, look at me, I'm dying! The blizzard in the alley is roaring a dirge for me, and I'm howling with it. I'm done for¹, gone! The bastard in the filthy cap — the cook in the normalized nutrition canteen serving the Central Economic Council² — sloshed boiling water at me and burned my left side. What a creep, and a proletarian to boot! Lord, God almighty, it hurts! The boiling water ate through to the bone. So I howl and howl and howl, but how can howling help?

What did I ever do to him? What? Did he think I'd eat the Economic Council out of its stores if I rummaged in the rubbish? Greedy creature. Take a look at his mug some time: fat, broad cheeks. He's a brass-faced thief. People, help! The white-hat gave me a taste of boiling water at noon; now it's dark, around four in the afternoon, going by the onion smell from the Prechistenka fire station. The firemen get buckwheat groats for dinner, as you well

¹ **I'm done for** — Я пропал

² **Central Economic Council** — Центральный совет народного хозяйства

know. But that's way down on my list, like mushrooms. Dogs I know from Prechistenka told me, however, that there's a place called The Bar on Neglinny Street, where people gobble up the special of the day, mushrooms *en sauce piquante*¹, at three roubles seventy-five a portion. To each his own — for me it's like licking galoshes... Oooow... My side is killing me, and I can see my future career absolutely clearly: tomorrow there will be sores and I'd like to know how I'm supposed to treat them. In the summer you can go down to Sokolniki Park, there's a particularly good grass there, and besides which, you can stuff yourself with sausage ends and the citizenry litter the place with greasy wrapping paper that's good to lick. And if not for some old biddy who sings in the moonlight — 'Celeste Aida'* — in a way that turns your stomach, all would be fine. But now where am I supposed to go? Have you been kicked by boots? Yes. Have you ever got a brick in the ribs? Plenty of times. I've suffered it all, I've accepted my fate, and if I'm crying now it's only from the physical pain and the hunger, because my spirit hasn't dimmed yet... The canine spirit is very tenacious. But my body is broken, battered, people have had their fun with it. The worst part is

¹ **en sauce piquante** — (фр.) в соусе пикан

* См. прим. перев. на с. 174.

this: once he'd poured the boiling water on me, it ate through the fur, and now there's no protection for my left side. I could easily get pneumonia, and if I do, citizens, I will starve to death. When you have pneumonia, you're supposed to lie under the main stairs inside, and who's going to run around the bins in search of food except me, a bedridden bachelor dog? If my lung is affected, I'll be crawling on my belly, weakened, and any guy with a stick can finish me off. And then the street-cleaners with their badges will grab me by my legs and toss me into their cart...

Of all the proletarians, street-cleaners are the vilest scum. Human dregs, the lowest category. You get different kinds of cooks. Take the late Vlas from Prechistenka. How many lives he saved! The most important thing when you're sick is to get a bite. And there were times, the old hounds say, when Vlas would toss a bone and it would have an ounce of meat on it. May he rest in peace for being a real human being, the personal chef to the Count Tolstoys, and not from the Council of Normalized Nutrition¹. What they do in the name of normalized nutrition is beyond a dog's mind to understand! Those bastards use rotten corned beef to

¹ **Council of Normalized Nutrition** — Совет нормального питания

Lowering her head, the young woman launched herself into the attack, breaking through the gates, and she was spun round and round, tossed and then twisted into a snowy funnel, before she vanished.

The dog remained near the alley, suffering the pain of his mutilated side, pressed himself against the cold wall, held his breath and decided that he would never leave this spot again, that he would die right there. Despair overwhelmed him. He felt such bitterness and pain, such loneliness and fear, that tiny canine tears bubbled from his eyes and dried on the spot. His fur on the wounded side was all in shredded, frozen clumps, revealing vicious red burns. How stupid, nasty and cruel were cooks. She called him "Sharik"...* What the hell kind of "Sharik" was he! Sharik was a fluff-ball, a round, well-fed, dumb, oatmeal-eating son of pedigree parents, and he was a shaggy, bony and scruffy stray, a homeless dog. But thanks for the kind thought.

The door of the brightly lit shop across the road slammed, and a citizen appeared. A citizen, not a comrade, and probably a gentleman. As he came closer, it was clear he was a gentleman. Don't you think I judge by the overcoat. Nonsense. Lots of proles wear overcoats now too. Of course, not

with collars like that, no way, but still you could get confused from a distance. But I judge by the eyes — you can't mistake them either near or far! Oh, eyes are a significant thing! Like a barometer. You can see everything — who has a vast desert in his heart, who can jab you in the ribs with the toe of his boot for no reason at all, and who is afraid of everything. There's such pleasure in nipping the last type in the calf. Afraid? So there. If you're afraid, you deserve it. Grrrrr... arf!

The gentleman crossed the street confidently in the column of blowing snow and moved towards the gate. Yes, yes, I could see everything about him. He wouldn't put away¹ that putrid corned beef, and if anyone dared serve him some he would raise such a fuss and write to the papers saying: "They gave me, Filipp Filippovich, rotten meat!"

Here he comes, closer and closer. This one eats well and doesn't steal. He won't kick you, but he's not afraid of anyone, and that's because he's never hungry. He is a gentleman who does intellectual labour, with a French pointy beard and a grey moustache, fluffy and dashing, like French knights had, but the blizzard carries his smell and it's a bad one — hospital and cigar.

¹ to put away — (зд.) лопать, уплетать

What the hell brings him to the Central Economy Co-op¹? Now he's right there... What's he looking for? Oh-oh... What could he want to buy in that crummy little store, aren't the fancy stores on Okhotny Ryad* enough? What is it?! Sausage. Mister, if you saw how they made that sausage you wouldn't go anywhere near the store. Give it to me!

The dog mustered what little strength it had and madly crawled out from beneath the gate onto the pavement. The blizzard thundered like a rifle shot above him, billowing the huge letters on a canvas poster: "IS REJUVENATION POSSIBLE?"

Of course it is. The smell rejuvenated me, got me up off my belly, raising fiery waves in my stomach that had been empty for two days, the smell vanquished the hospital, the heavenly fragrance of ground mare with garlic and pepper.

I can smell it, I know he's got sausage in his right pocket. He's standing above me. O, master! Look at me. I am dying. We've got slaves' hearts, a miserable fate!

The dog crawled like a snake on its belly, streaming tears. Note the cook's work. But you're not going to give me any. Oh, I know rich people very well! Yet, essentially, what do you want it for? What do you want with rotten horsemeat? You won't get poison

¹ **Central Economy Co-op** — кооператив Центрохоза

like this anywhere except at the Moscow Agricultural Processing Trust¹, that's for sure. You had breakfast today, you world luminary, thanks to male sex glands. Oooo-oooh... What is going on in this fair world? I guess it's too early to die, and despair is a sin. I have to lick his hands, there's nothing else left to do.

The mysterious gentleman bent over the dog, the gold frames around his eyes glinting, and took a long white package out of his right pocket. Without taking off his brown gloves, he unwrapped the paper, which the storm immediately took away, and broke off a piece of sausage, which was called Cracow Special. And gave the piece to the dog. Oh, what a selfless individual! Oooh — ooh!

"Phweet," the gentleman whistled and added in a stern voice, "Here! Sharik, Sharik!"

Sharik again. I've been baptized. Call me whatever you want. In return for your exceptional act...

The dog instantly pulled off the casing, clamped onto the Cracow sausage with a slurp and gulped it down in a trice. And choked on the sausage and snow to the point of tears, because he had almost swallowed the string in his greed. More, I lick your hand more. I kiss your trousers, my benefactor!

¹ **Moscow Agricultural Processing Trust** — Моссель-пром (торгово-промышленная организация 1922—1937 гг.)

"Enough for now..." The gentleman spoke in short bursts, as if giving orders. He leant over Sharik, looked interrogatively into his eyes and unexpectedly ran his gloved hand intimately and gently over Sharik's belly.

"Ah-ha," he said portentously, "no collar, that's lovely, you're just the one I want. Follow me." He clicked his fingers.

"Phweet!"

Follow you? To the ends of the earth. You can kick me with your suede shoes and I won't say a word.

Street lamps glowed all over Prechistenka. His side ached terribly, but Sharik sometimes forgot about it, lost in one thought only — how not to lose in the crowd the miraculous vision in a fur coat, and how to express his love and loyalty. And he expressed it some seven times down the length of Prechistenka to Obukhov Lane. He kissed his shoe; near Myortvy Lane, trying to clear the path, he scared some lady with his wild bark so much that she sank down on an advertising pillar; and once or twice he whined to maintain the man's pity.

Some bitch of a stray cat, looking like a Siberian, slipped out of a drain pipe, having caught the scent of the sausage despite the blizzard. Sharik almost lost his mind at the prospect that this rich

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