

Mikhail Bulgakov

Moscow Settings

at the forefront

– Please, welcome, dears, – said the host kindly and pointed to the table with a solemn, I dare say, regal gesture.

Without any need to be asked twice, we took our seats immediately and unfolded heavily starched napkins.

There were four of us. The host and his cousin were both former counselors-at-law, the host's second cousin, who once used to bear a respected status of the state councilor's widow and then served for some time in the Council of National Economy, was now known simply as Zinaida Ivanovna, and one more dear guest – it's me naturally – a former ... well, I suppose it is a completely and utterly irrelevant detail though... who at that moment was a man with so called indefinite pursuits.

The sunlight of the first April day dashed through the window and was sparkling in assiduously polished glasses.

– It's spring, thank God! I'm feeling totally fed up to the back teeth with this winter, – said the host and

delicately touched the neck of the decanter.

– Tell me about it! – I exclaimed, skillfully pulled a sprat out of the can, skinned it, spread the butter on the bread, covered it with the mauled trunk of the above mentioned sprat and, grinning affably at Zinaida Ivanovna, added, – To your good health!

Then we took a drop.

– Isn't it too weak... ahem ... you know, diluted? – inquired our dear host solicitously.

– Just enough, – I replied, taking a breath.

– Maybe a bit weak, – noted Zinaida Ivanovna.

The men protested in unison and we drank off another glass. The maid brought in a bowl of soup.

After the second shot the divine warmth overflowed my body and placidity folded me in its arms. I instantly felt deep affection for the host and his cousin, and caught myself thinking that Zinaida Ivanovna, despite her autumn years of 38, was still a very good-looking woman, and that Karl Marx's beard, placed directly opposite to me on the wall next to the map of some railways, was not at all as monstrously huge as it is commonly believed. The story of how Karl Marx, whom our respected counselor-at-law disdained with all his heart, appeared on the wall of the dining room is the following. Our dearest host is one of the astutest people in Moscow, if not the astutest of all. He was likely the first to sense that the current developments were quite serious and long-term, and