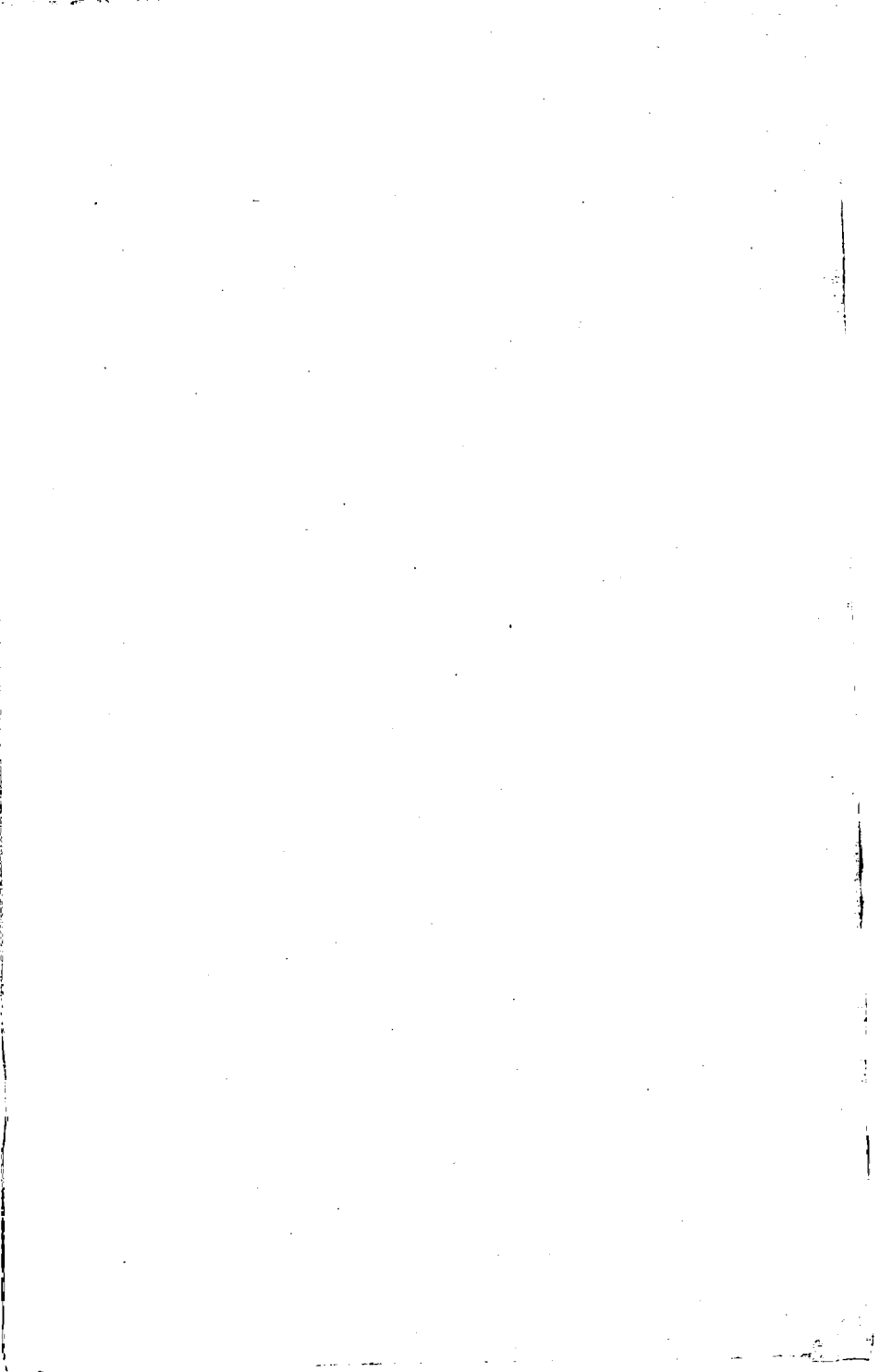


BEREZHKOV

THE STORY OF AN INVENTOR

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ALEXANDER BEK

BEREZHKOV

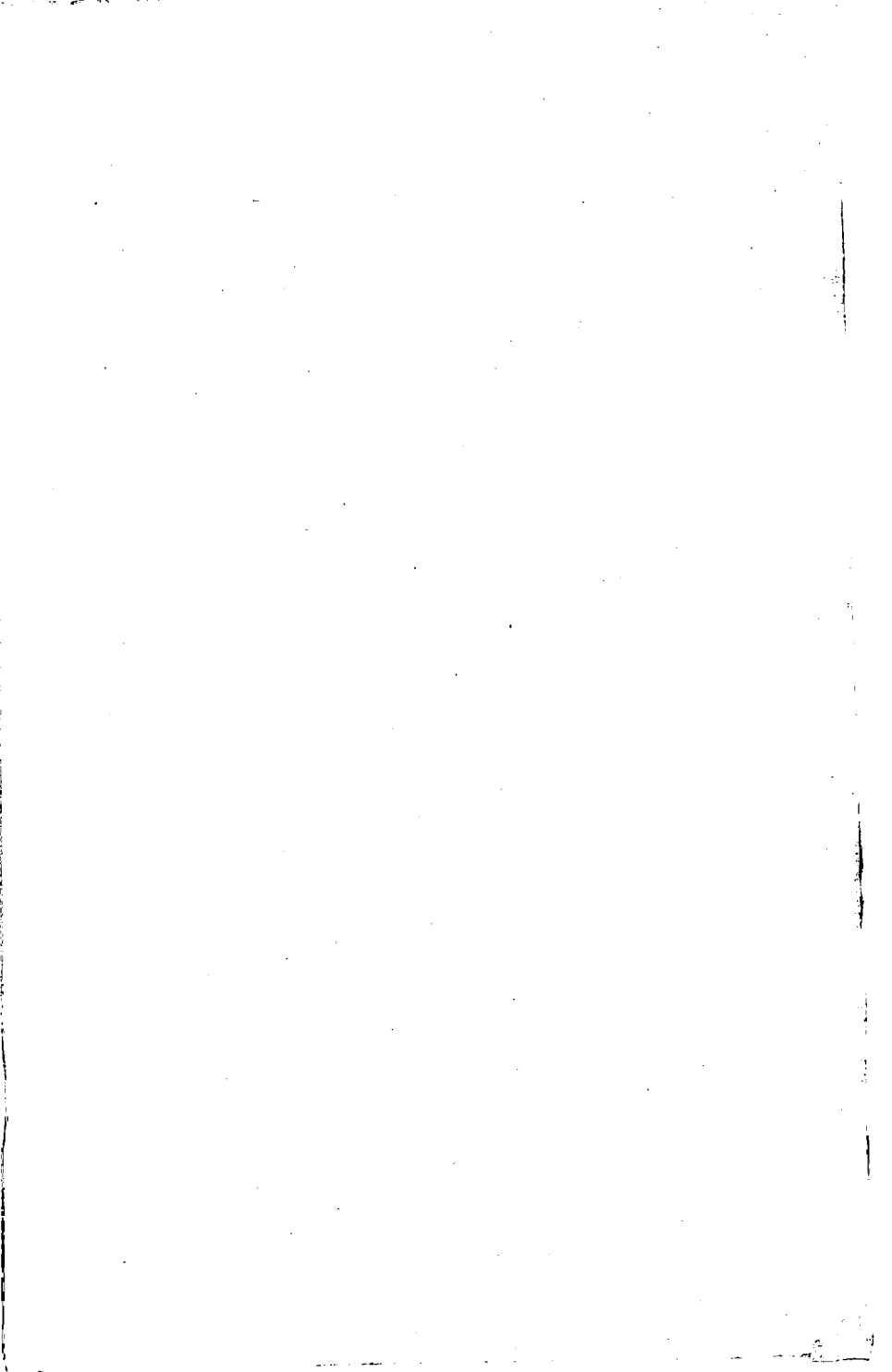
THE STORY OF AN INVENTOR

FOREIGN LANGUAGES
PUBLISHING HOUSE

Moscow

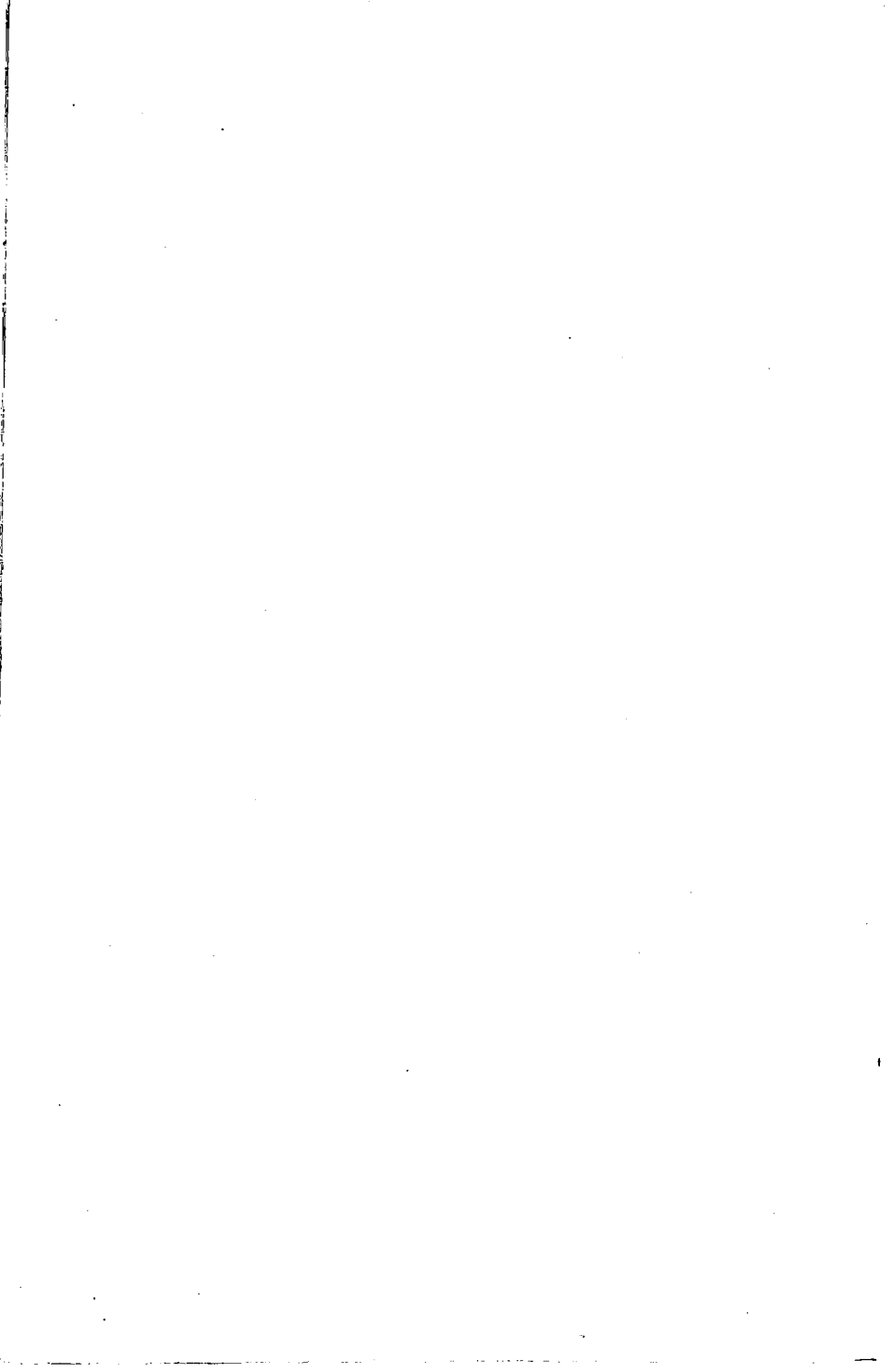
TRANSLATED FROM THE RUSSIAN
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Part One



THE ADROS ENGINE

1

"You don't say so!" I cried.

Nothing is more stimulating to a narrator than this simple well-timed interjection.

"I tell you, it was terrific!" Berezhkov went on. "I felt like shouting, but I was so excited I could not find my voice. There he was, flying—can you imagine it!—actually flying over the Khodinka airfield."

"Well I never!"

"It was terrific! Marvellous!"

Berezhkov was excitedly repeating his pet phrases as he warmed to his theme. My interest—possibly exaggerated for purely professional reasons—was obviously giving him the keenest pleasure. He liked to tell a story and was good at it. Just then he made a sustained pause in the most interesting place.

He regarded me quizzically with his small greenish eyes and moved his large smiling lips as if tasting the flavour of the moment.

I knew Berezhkov to be a keen lover of scientific adventure stories and thrilling novels with fast-moving plots, and it struck me that the story he was telling with such gusto sounded just like a chapter out of one such novel. Could it be just fantasy, I wondered.

Berezhkov seemed to read my thoughts.

"I'll show you a photograph if you like," he said challengingly, and without waiting for my reply he rose from his chair. I knew he had turned forty that year, but tall, lean and mercurial, he looked fully ten years younger. His hair was cut short like a boy's and this well became him.

He pulled out a desk drawer, took from it a large packet, and shook a heap of photographs out of it. Looking over his shoulder I had glimpses of group photographs and portraits, Berezhkov on a motor-cycle next to Pushkin's monument in Moscow, other familiar sights of Moscow, Berezhkov beside an airplane, and more and more airplanes with Berezhkov beside them. One of the photographs made him laugh. He turned round, showing me again his fresh clean-shaven face, his smiling lips and slits of narrowed eyes webbed round with humorous wrinkles. The photograph was of young Berezhkov standing next to an aerosleigh in a snowy field, wearing a fur-cap and a tightly belted sheepskin coat with a revolver strapped to the right side.

"A samovared sleigh. Designed by Berezhkov. Brilliant invention," he said with a comically dismal air. "Some day I'll tell you that sad story."

He was tossing the photographs aside one after another, but could not find the one he wanted to show me. I felt amused. Standing there with his back to me, Berezhkov could not, of course, see my sceptical little smile, yet his ears turned pink.

"You think I'm lying?" he said bluntly, swinging round to face me.

"It does sound rather incredible," I hedged.

To tell the truth, I was just teasing him in the hope that the spur of doubt would loose a flood of further argumentative detail—those precious grains of life it was my business, *ex officio*, to dig out.

"Incredible?" Berezhkov repeated. "It's marvellous! I tell you what?"

He glanced at the clock and went over to the open window. His gait was rather memorable. Despite a slight limp on his left foot, he walked with a surprisingly swift, light step, as though he were unaware of being lame.

It was a lovely May day outside. From up here, on the sixth floor of the aircraft department's new house, one had a bird's-eye view of the city's roofs. Painted with red lead according to an old-established custom of ours, with here and there a sprinkling of galvanized sheets, the roofs were tarnished and coated with the city's dust. Hot waves rose from their sun-warmed surface, and through the shimmering air the outlines of the building cranes above the new block of flats that was being erected on Sadovaya Ring nearby swam against a shining sky. The fresh brickwork blazed in the sun, and every gaping aperture and projection was rimmed in shadow, which gave it the effect of bulk. From Sadovaya Ring, which was hidden by the houses, came the incessant hooting of the motor traffic, but here, lost amid the maze of ancient Moscow's narrow winding streets, lay a peaceful old park with a pond all asparkle in the sunlight.

"I tell you what," Berezhkov repeated. "Would you like to see that fantastic wheel?"

"The actual wheel?"

"Yes."

"But how are we going to find it?"

"Leave that to me. Are you coming?"

"How are we going?"

"By motor-cycle."

I thought of Berezhkov's lame foot, and was on the point of putting my surprise into words, but pulled myself up with a muttered, "H'm.... Is there a decent road?"

"The road's nothing. Berezhkov will cycle where no man will dare to walk. Come along!"

2

At that time—the date of my notes gives it as the year 1936—I was working in the "memoirs office." It was a queer and fascinating job. In the whole country only a few men, figuring in our staff lists under the vague name of "interviewer," could claim kinship with me in that line of journalism.

That small staff of "interviewers" worked under the auspices of Gorky, the "memoirs office" being one of the numerous literary undertakings sponsored by him. We were told to look out for interesting people, great and small, celebrated and obscure, and to get from them the stories of their lives. We were told to bring in shorthand notes and reports; it was to be a collection of human-interest documents, material for the historian and the writer; it was to be our job, our living.

One primary gift, or rather art, was demanded of the "interviewer"—that of listening. It was a gift of sympathy, of earnestness, and attentiveness. We had no written instructions. At one of our work conferences someone had read out a passage from *War and Peace*, and we had, of one accord, accepted this as a kind of "guide for the interviewer."

"Natasha, her head supported in her hand, and her face changing continually with the story, watched Pierre, never taking her eyes off him, and was in imagination passing through all he told her with him. Not only her eyes, but her exclamations and the brief questions she put showed Pierre that she understood from his words

just what he was trying to convey by them. It was evident that she understood, not only what he said, but also what he would have liked to say and could not express in words."

To be sure, in the course of time we worked out professional methods of our own. They were based on a warm interest towards the person who was confiding to us his story. Without this deep-felt interest the "interviewer" would have been a failure.

To continue the passage from *War and Peace*:

"Natasha, though herself unconscious of it, was all rapt attention; she did not lose one word, one quaver of the voice, one glance, one twitching in the facial muscles, one gesture of Pierre's. She caught the word before it was uttered and bore it straight to her open heart, divining the secret import of all Pierre's spiritual travail."

Here you have the secret of our work admirably expressed. It was our "going into the world" hand in hand with Gorky, as it were, for the aging writer was always an eager reader of the notes that we brought in.

It was these "memoirs-office" duties of mine that brought me into contact with Alexei Nikolayevich Berezhkov, the aircraft-engine designer, who was known at that time only to a comparatively small circle of aircraft industry workers.

At our very first meeting, after listening to him for half an hour or so, that sixth sense of an "interviewer" told me even before I had got to know the peculiarities of his mind and character, that here was a very talented man, and an excellent story-teller at that. And so I became a frequent guest of his and started "working" him like a digger who had struck a rich vein. I felt that he would yield splendid material for our collection of life stories.

3

We went down into the yard. Berezhkov's old war-horse of a motor-cycle stood spick and span in the shed. I had learned quite a number of amazing things about it while we were going downstairs.

Berezhkov slipped on a pair of gloves and swiftly and efficiently filled up with oil and gasoline. Screwing down the cap, he said:

"I made a record on this bike that nobody could beat."

"What was that?"

"I rode hands-off along a single tram rail all the way from the Bolshoi Theatre to Zubovsky Square with a pillion passenger and never once slipped off the rail."

"Hands-off?"

"Yes."

"You don't say so!"

"You don't believe me? I'll do it again if you like."

"No thanks," I said hastily.

Berezhkov glanced at me with an odd smile. I didn't like the look of that smile at all.

He wheeled the motor-cycle out of the shed. The well-adjusted engine started smoothly and easily without any of the usual din and racket.

Berezhkov stood listening to the throb of the engine with a curious remote expression. I had met Berezhkov several times already and had noticed that look before. Usually somewhat cock-sure and excitable, inclined to boast and show off, Berezhkov at such moments would become a different man, shorn as it were of the tinsel and sham.

"A penny for your thoughts," I said.

"I was just listening to the engine. Jump on."

Berezhkov swung his leg over the motor-cycle and I settled myself into the pillion saddle. He slipped the engine into gear and we moved off smoothly.

And then, obviously taking revenge for my sceptical remarks, Berezhkov began the craziest of stunt-riding ever done in the narrow confines of a Moscow courtyard with brick walls on all sides. Without touching the handle-bars he circled round the yard, accelerating all the time. I expected him to crash at any moment into the corner of the house or run smack into the dustbin, but every time the careening motor-cycle missed the obstacle by what was nothing short of a miracle.

To my shame I must confess that I clutched at Berezhkov's shoulders. But he sat coolly in his seat with his arms folded on his chest. During the performance he turned round to look at me. The sight must have satisfied him, because he gave me a wink and shot out of the gate.

Several minutes later our panting motor-cycle was standing before the red light of the traffic signals on Mayakovsky Square among a huddle of leashed cars with idling engines, all waiting eagerly to spurt ahead the moment the green light gave them the road. In those days there was no concert hall building nor Metro station on the corner of the square. Nothing but a Metro shaft behind a blank wooden fence with the already familiar sign "M" over it. It looked as if they were working there on Sundays, too. Girls in tarpaulin jackets and trousers, unwieldy rubber waders and broad-brimmed wet miners' hats, all bespattered with fresh concrete, came running out chatting and laughing. They weaved their way adroitly among the waiting cars, and Berezhkov could not contain himself from waving his hand to them.

We rode on, making many a stop before the traffic control lights until at last we got out into the suburbs and swept out into the open country.

The motor-cycle streaked along, overtaking all the traffic ahead of us. Berezhkov couldn't bear the sight of any car in front of him and had to get ahead of it at all cost. The wind whistled in my ears and I was all but flung out of my seat over every pothole. I blessed the minute when no car was to be seen ahead of us and we could ease off to what seemed a less suicidal speed.

4

We had been travelling for over an hour, and after shooting across the bridge over the gleaming Oka and turning off the high-road, Berezhkov at last stopped the motor-cycle.

"It's somewhere round here," he said. "Yes, here's our platform."

I couldn't see any platform. We were standing by the railway track with the woods towering on either side, but nowhere did I see any buildings.

"Neat job, that," Berezhkov said, kicking something on the ground.

Taking a good look I saw the cut of a thick post, blackened by time, sawn off level with the ground. Nearby were other similar stumps—the remains of some platform.

"A historical spot," Berezhkov said, taking a look round. "I was here last in nineteen eighteen."

"As long ago as that?"

"Yes. The place is all overgrown, dammit!"

I followed his glance down the railway track and saw nothing but two walls of forest narrowing to a point in the distance. One side was bathed in sunshine; there, in the play of light and shadow, gleamed the resinous pines and the almost limpid greenery of the birches.

Berezhkov stood with folded arms, admiring the scenery. But we had to get moving. Luckily, a human figure appeared on the footpath a little way off. Berezhkov spotted it at once.

"Come along," he said, swinging into the seat. "Must be some local."

It turned out to be an elderly peasant woman.

"Good day," Berezhkov said. "Do you live here?"

"Yes."

"Did you ever hear of a machine being built here a long, long time ago?"

"Not as I know of. I'm an illiterate woman, son."

"Well, isn't there something out of the common here in these woods? Some thumping big machine, you know. Isn't there some great iron thingumbob standing by the river somewhere?"

"The go-devil, you mean?"

"The what?"

"We call it the go-devil."

Berezhkov burst out laughing, then turned to me with a triumphant shout, "What did I tell you! Neat definition that, eh!"