

BORIS POLEVOI

**A STORY ABOUT
A REAL MAN**



FOREIGN LANGUAGES PUBLISHING HOUSE

Moscow 1949

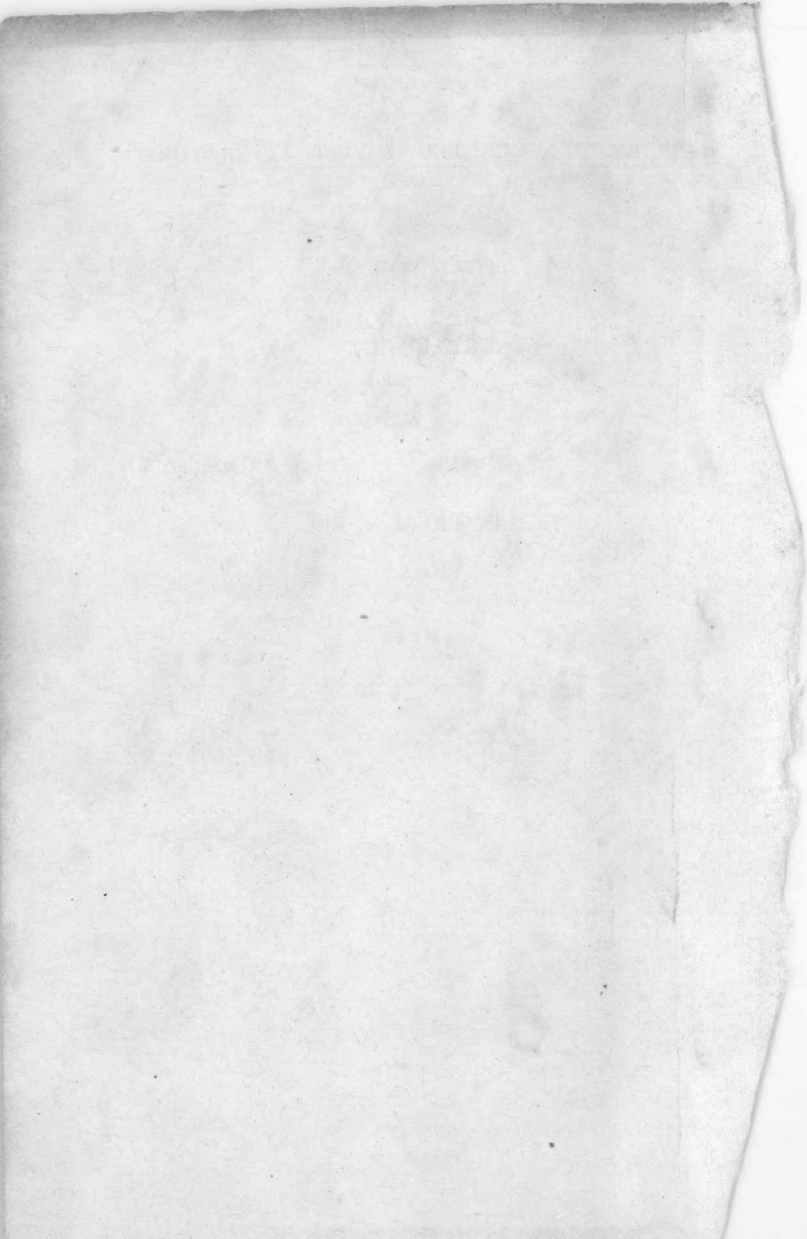
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Boris Polevoi

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STALIN PRIZE NOVEL

1946



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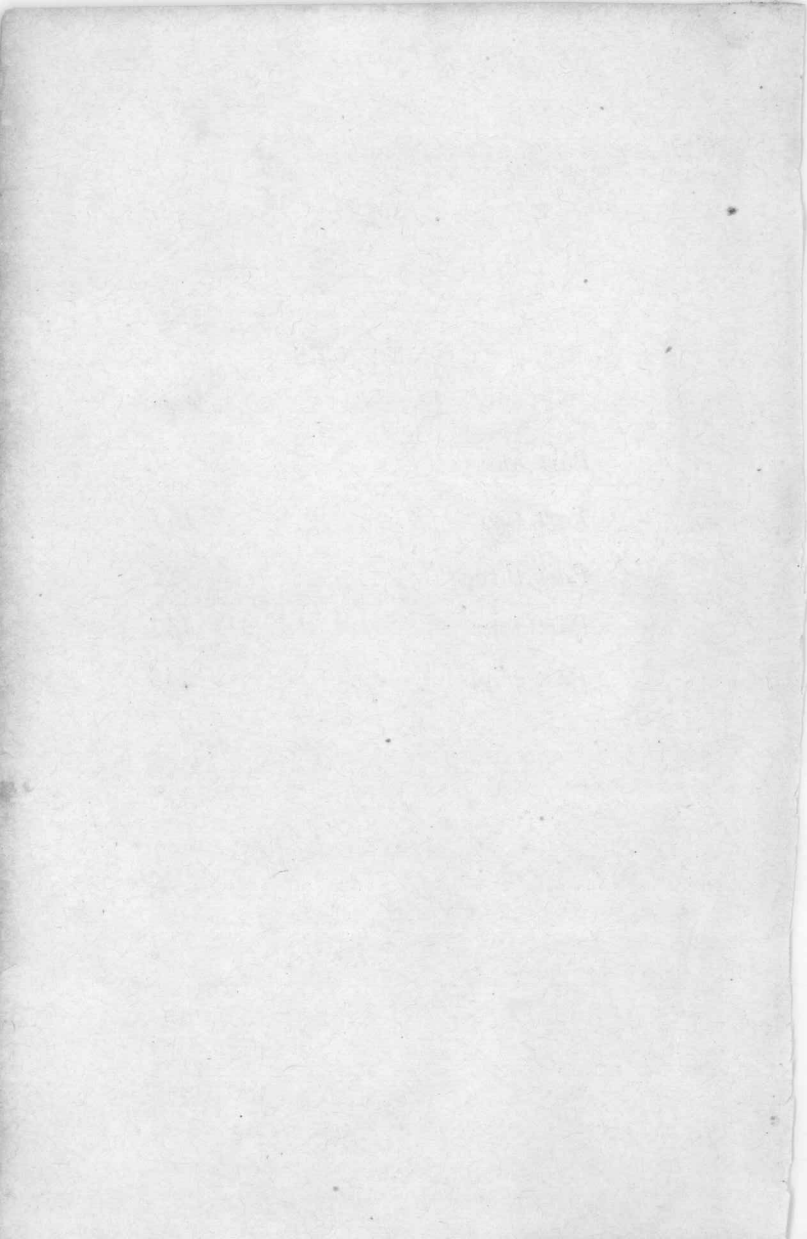
Moscow 1949

TRANSLATED FROM THE RUSSIAN

BY J. FINEBERG

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PART ONE

* 1 *

THE STARS were still glittering with a bright, cold light, but the faint glow of morning already lit the eastern sky. The trees gradually emerged from the gloom. Suddenly, a strong, fresh breeze blew through their tops. At once the forest came to life and was filled with loud, resonant sounds. The century-old pines called to each other in anxious, hissing whispers, and the dry powdery snow poured with a soft rustle from their agitated branches.

The wind dropped as suddenly as it had risen. The trees again sank into their frozen torpor. And then all the forest sounds that heralded the dawn broke out: the greedy snarling of the wolves in the glade near-by, the cautious yelp of foxes, and the first, uncertain taps of the just awakened woodpecker, sounding so musical in the stillness of the forest that it seemed as though he was tapping not a tree trunk, but the hollow body of a violin.

Again the wind blew in noisy gusts through the heavy pine tops. The last of the stars were softly

extinguished in the now brighter sky; and the sky itself had shrunk and seemed more dense. The forest, shaking off the last remnants of the gloom of night, stood out in all its verdant grandeur. From the rosy tint that struck the curly heads of the pines and the sharp spires of the firs, one could tell that the sun had risen and that the day promised to be bright, crisp and frosty.

It was quite light by now. The wolves had retired into the thick of the forest to digest their nocturnal prey, and the fox, too, had left the glade, leaving cunningly traced, winding tracks on the snow. The ancient forest rang with a steady, continuous sound. Only the fussing of the birds, the woodpecker's tapping, the merry chirping of the yellowish tomtits darting from branch to branch and the dry, greedy croak of jays introduced some variation into this mournful, anxious, long-drawn-out sound that rolled in soft waves through the forest.

A magpie that was cleaning its sharp, black beak on the branch of an alder tree suddenly cocked its head, listened and squatted, ready to take flight. The branches creaked with a note of alarm. Somebody, big and strong, was pushing through the undergrowth. The bushes creaked, the tops of the young pines swayed in alarm, the crunching of the crisp snow was heard. The magpie screeched and, shooting out its arrowlike tail, darted away.

From out of the snow-covered pines appeared a brown muzzle, crowned by heavy, branching antlers. Frightened eyes scanned the enormous glade. Pink, velvety nostrils twitched convulsively, emitting gusts of hot, vaporous breath.

The old stag stood stock-still among the pines like a statue. Only its flocky skin quivered nervously on its back. Its ears, cocked in alarm, caught every sound, and its hearing was so acute that it heard a bark beetle boring into the wood of a pine tree. But even these sensitive ears heard nothing in the forest except the twittering and chirping of the birds, the tapping of the woodpecker and the even rustle of the pine treetops.

Its hearing reassured the stag, but its sense of smell warned it of danger. The fresh odour of melting snow was mingled with pungent, offensive and sinister smells alien to this dense forest. The animal's sad, black eyes encountered dark figures lying on the crusty surface of the dazzling white snow. Without moving a step, it tightened every muscle, ready to dart into the thicket; but the figures on the snow lay motionless, close together, some on top of others. There were a great many of them, but not one moved or disturbed the virginal silence. Near them, out of the snowdrifts, towered strange monsters; it was these figures that emitted those pungent and sinister smells.

The stag stood on the edge of the glade, gazing with frightened eyes, unable to grasp what had happened to this herd of motionless and seemingly harmless humans.

A sound from above startled the animal. The skin on its back quivered again and the muscles of its hind legs drew still tighter.

But the sound also proved to be harmless. It was like the low droning of cockchafers circling among the leaves of a budding birch tree. Now and again a short, sharp, rasping sound, like the evening croak of a corn crake in the marsh, was added to their droning.

Then the cockchafers came in sight, dancing in the blue, frosty sky with glittering wings. Again and again the corn crake croaked up on high. One of the cockchafers hurtled to the ground with outspread wings; the rest continued their dance in the azure sky. The stag relaxed its muscles, stepped into the glade and licked the crisp snow, casting, however, a wary glance at the sky. Suddenly, another cockchafer separated from the dancing swarm, and leaving a bushy tail behind it, dived straight down into the glade. Its size grew so rapidly that the stag had barely time to make one leap into the woods when something enormous and more frightful than the sudden burst of an autumn storm struck the treetops and dashed to the ground with

a crash that made the whole forest ring. The ring sounded like a groan, and its echo swept through the trees, overtaking the stag that was tearing into the depths of the forest.

The echo sank into the green depths of the pines. The powdery snow, disturbed by the falling aeroplane, floated down from the treetops, sparkling and glittering. The powerful and weighty silence reigned once again. Amidst this silence were distinctly heard a man's groan, and the crunching of the snow beneath the paws of a bear whom the unusual noises had driven from the depths of the forest into the glade.

The bear was huge, old and shaggy. Its unkempt fur stuck out in brown clumps on its sunken sides and hung in tufts from its lean haunches. Since the autumn war had raged in these parts and had even penetrated into this dense western forest where formerly only the foresters and hunters came, and then not often. Already in the autumn the road of battle in the vicinity had driven the bear from his lair just when he was preparing for his winter sleep, and now, hungry and angry, he roamed the forest, knowing no rest.

The bear halted at the edge of the glade, at the spot where the stag had just been. It sniffed the stag's fresh, fragrant tracks, breathed heavily and greedily, twitched its lean sides and listened. The

stag had gone, but near the place where it had been the bear heard sounds evidently produced by a living and probably a feeble being. The fur bristled on the bear's withers. It stretched out its muzzle. And again that pitiful sound, barely audible, came from the edge of the glade.

Slowly, stepping cautiously on its soft paws, under the weight of which the hard, dry snow crunched with a whine, the bear moved towards the motionless human figure that was lying half-buried in the snow.

* 2 *

Airman Alexei Meresyev had got caught in a double pair of "pincers." This is the worst thing that can happen to a man in an air battle. He had spent all his ammunition and was practically unarmed when four German aircraft surrounded him and, giving him no chance to dodge or change his course, tried to force him to proceed to their base.

It came about in this way. A unit of fighter planes under the command of Senior Lieutenant Meresyev went out to escort a unit of "Ils" that was to attack an enemy aerodrome. The daring operation was carried out successfully. The Stormoviks, "flying tanks" as the infantry called them, almost scraping the pine treetops, stole right up to

the aerodrome where a number of large transport Junkers were lined up. Suddenly diving out of the spikes of the grey-blue pine forest, they raced over the heavy transport planes and poured a stream of lead and steel into them from their cannon and machine guns, peppered them with tailed shells. Meresyev, who with his unit of four was guarding the area of attack, distinctly saw from above the dark figures of men rushing about the aerodrome, saw the transport planes creeping heavily across the hard-packed snow, saw the Stormoviks return to the attack again and again, and saw the crews of the Junkers, under a hail of fire, taxi their craft to the runway and rise into the air.

It was at this point that Alexei committed his fatal blunder. Instead of closely guarding the area of attack, he allowed himself to be "tempted by easy prey," as airmen call it. He put his craft into a dive, dropped like a stone upon a slow and heavy transport plane that had just torn itself off the ground, and found delight in stitching its motley-coloured, rectangular, corrugated duralumin body with several long bursts from his machine gun. He was so self-confident that he did not trouble to see the enemy craft hurtle to the ground. On the other side of the aerodrome another Junkers rose into the air. Alexei went after him. He attacked—but was unsuccessful. His stream of tracer bullets trailed

over the slowly rising enemy plane. He veered round abruptly and attacked again, missed again, reached his victim again, and this time sent him down away over the forest by furiously firing into its broad, cigar-shaped body several long bursts from his broadside gun. After laying out the Junkers and circling twice in triumph over the spot where a black column of smoke was rising out of the heaving, green sea of endless forest, he turned his plane back to the enemy aerodrome.

But he did not get there. He saw the three fighting planes of his unit engaged in battle with nine "Messers," which had evidently been called up by the commander of the German aerodrome to repel the attack of the Stormoviks. Boldly hurling themselves upon the Germans, who outnumbered them exactly three to one, the airmen tried to deflect the enemy from the Stormoviks. In the course of the fighting they drew the enemy further and further away, as black grouse do, pretending to be wounded and enticing hunters away from their young.

Alexei felt so ashamed that he had allowed himself to be tempted by easy prey that he could feel his cheeks burning under his helmet. He chose a target and, clenching his teeth, rushed into the fray. The target he had chosen was a "Messer" which had separated itself somewhat from the rest

and was evidently also looking out for prey. Getting all the speed he possibly could out of his plane, Alexei hurled himself upon the enemy's flank. He attacked the German in accordance with all the rules of the art. The grey body of the enemy craft was distinctly visible in the weblike cross of his sight when he pressed his trigger, but the enemy craft slipped by unharmed. Alexei could not have missed. The target was near and was distinctly visible in the sight. "Ammunition!" Alexei guessed, and at once felt a cold shiver run down his spine. He pressed the trigger again to test the gun but failed to feel the vibration that every airman feels with his whole body when he discharges his gun. The magazines were empty; he had used up all his ammunition in chasing the "transports."

But the enemy did not know that! Alexei resolved to plunge into the scrimmage in order to improve at least the numerical proportion between the combatants. But he was mistaken. The fighter plane that he had unsuccessfully attacked was in charge of an experienced and observant airman. The German realized that his opponent's ammunition had run out and issued an order to his colleagues. Four "Messers" separated from the rest and surrounded Alexei, one on each flank, one above and one below. Dictating his course by bursts of tracer bullets that were distinctly visible

in the clear, blue air, they caught him in a double pair of "pincers."

Several days before that Alexei had heard that the famous German Richthofen air division had arrived in this area, Staraya Russa, from the West. This division was manned by the finest aces in the fascist Reich and was under the patronage of Goering himself. Alexei now realized that he had fallen into the clutches of these air wolves and that, evidently, they wanted to compel him to fly to their aerodrome, force him to land and take him prisoner. Cases like that had happened. Alexei himself had seen a fighter unit under the command of his chum, Andrei Degtyarenko, Hero of the Soviet Union, bring a German air scout to their aerodrome and force him to land.

The long, ashen-grey face of the German prisoner and his staggering footsteps rose before Alexei's eyes. "Be taken prisoner? Never! That trick won't come off!" he determined.

But do what he would, he could not escape. The moment he tried to swerve from the course the Germans were dictating to him, they barred his road with machine-gun fire. And again the vision of the German prisoner, his contorted face and trembling jaw, rose before Alexei's eyes. Degrading, animal fear was stamped on that face.

Meresyev tightly clenched his teeth, opened the