

Shakmut

Clive Phillipps Wooley

CHAPTER I.

THE Russian nightingale sings tonight.”
 “True he will sing and if you dost not hurry, thou wilt not relish his song. It will be the knout for thee as it was last night for that new peredovtchik.”

The first speaker laughed uneasily and went on faster with his work.

“He will never give me the knout for refusing to drink good vodka. The new man must be mad.”

“Aye! men are mad who refuse to obey the Governor here. He punishes as he pleases. Russia is far off, and no enemy of his ever got back even as far as Siberia for trial.”

“Something happens. Relsky was drowned, and that last fellow they sent for trial committed suicide—Suicide!”

The man laughed grimly, they had grown used to grim jokes, in the service of the Russian Alaskan Company.

“Why wouldn’t the new peredovtchik drink with little Sacha last night?”

“Now God knows. Some say he does not drink, but that cannot be true. He was a Russian and a soldier. I think that he is a cunning fox, and hopes to go back at the end of his seven years. As if the Governor could not run him up a bill with the Company whether he drinks or not. Drink, say I! You get something for your money then, and we must all die here.”

“Whether we pay the Company or not. I wish the Company would let me run up a bill.”

“To be paid in the copecks thou earnest? Thou art over easy to hold brother. That dodge is for men like this Stroganoff.”

“He is to be blooded tonight is he not?”

“So they say at the Fort. I wonder if he kills better than he drinks?”

“He should do; he was at Eylau.”

“At Eylau. Who might he be then?”

“One of Miloradovitch’s fire-eaters.”

“An officer under Miloradovitch? But they were all nobles. Why comes he here?”

“Nobles fall like other men, only further.”

At that moment a bugle sounded, and the two cossacks, creoles of the type which served under Altasoff, with thin-lipped leathery faces and horny hands; men rough as the bears of Mt. St. Elias, snatched up their rifles and doubled down to the beach. As they went in the failing light, they blundered over the boulders with which Sitka’s beach was strewn, and growled at every stumble.

At the water’s edge there were thirty more like them, all armed, all grimly serviceable men, busy for the most part packing or launching the long canoes in which they travelled, and all quick in obedience to a little beetle browed man in sheepskins. Lawless they might be, but this man had taught them to obey. When the canoes were ready for the launching, the man in sheepskins called for one Yaksheen Anadirsky.

A cossack of pure Russian blood, with gigantic shoulders, and grey moustaches which stood out at right angles to his fierce face, stepped up and shouted:

“Thou knowest the way Yaksheem?”

“I know it Excellence.”

“And understandest what thou hast to do?”

“Exactly Excellence.”

“The Shaman Shakmut and the Kalushes of his tribe, have as thou knowest refused to find hunters for the Company. That is rebellion against Holy Mother Russia, who has cared for them so ten-