

Negore, the Coward

Jack London

HE had followed the trail of his fleeing people for eleven days, and his pursuit had been in itself a flight; for behind him he knew full well were the dreaded Russians, toiling through the swampy lowlands and over the steep divides, bent on no less than the extermination of all his people. He was travelling light. A rabbit-skin sleeping-robe, a muzzle-loading rifle, and a few pounds of sun-dried salmon constituted his outfit. He would have marvelled that a whole people - women and children and aged - could travel so swiftly, had he not known the terror that drove them on.

It was in the old days of the Russian occupancy of Alaska, when the nineteenth century had run but half its course, that Negore fled after his fleeing tribe and came upon it this summer night by the head waters of the Pee-lat. Though near the midnight hour, it was bright day as he passed through the weary camp. Many saw him, all knew him, but few and cold were the greetings he received.

"Negore, the Coward," he heard Illiha, a young woman, laugh, and Sun-ne, his sister's daughter, laughed with her.

Black anger ate at his heart; but he gave no sign, threading his way among the camp-fires until he came to one where sat an old man. A young woman was kneading with skilful fingers the tired muscles of his legs. He raised a sightless face and listened intently as Negore's foot crackled a dead twig.

"Who comes?" he queried in a thin, tremulous voice.

"Negore," said the young woman, scarcely looking up from her task.

Negore's face was expressionless. For many minutes he stood and waited. The old man's head had sunk back upon his chest. The young woman pressed and prodded the wasted muscles, resting her body on her knees, her bowed head hidden as in a cloud by her black wealth of hair. Negore watched the supple body, bending at the hips as a lynx's body might bend, pliant as a young willow stalk, and, withal, strong as only youth is strong. He looked, and was aware of a great yearning, akin in sensation to physical hunger. At last he spoke, saying:

"Is there no greeting for Negore, who has been long gone and has but now come back?"

She looked up at him with cold eyes. The old man chuckled to himself after the manner of the old.

"Thou art my woman, Oona," Negore said, his tones dominant and conveying a hint of menace.

She arose with catlike ease and suddenness to her full height, her eyes flashing, her nostrils quivering like a deer's.

"I was thy woman to be, Negore, but thou art a coward; the daughter of Old Kinoos mates not with a coward!"

She silenced him with an imperious gesture as he strove to speak.

"Old Kinoos and I came among you from a strange land. Thy people took us in by their fires and made us warm, nor asked whence or why we wandered. It was their thought that Old Kinoos had lost the sight of his eyes from age; nor did Old Kinoos say otherwise, nor did I, his daughter. Old Kinoos is a brave man, but Old Kinoos was never a boaster. And now, when I tell thee of how his blindness came to be, thou wilt know, beyond question, that the daughter of Kinoos cannot mother the children of a coward such as thou art, Negore."

Again she silenced the speech that rushed up to his tongue.

"Know, Negore, if journey be added unto journey of all thy journeyings through this land, thou wouldst not come to the unknown Sitka on the Great Salt Sea. In that place there be many Russian folk, and their rule is harsh. And from Sitka, Old Kinoos, who was Young Kinoos in those days, fled away with me, a babe in his arms, along the islands in the midst of the sea. My mother dead tells the tale of his wrong; a Russian, dead with a spear through breast and back, tells the tale of the vengeance of Kinoos.

"But wherever we fled, and however far we fled, always did we find the hated Russian folk. Kinoos was unafraid, but the sight of them was a hurt to his eyes; so we fled on and on, through the seas and years, till we came to the Great Fog Sea, Negore, of which thou hast heard, but which thou hast never seen. We lived among many peoples, and I grew to be a woman; but Kinoos, growing old, took to him no other woman, nor did I take a man.

"At last we came to Pastolik, which is where the Yukon drowns itself in the Great Fog Sea. Here we lived long, on the rim of the sea, among a people by whom the Russians were well hated. But sometimes they came, these Russians, in great ships, and made the people of Pastolik show them the way through the islands uncountable of the many-mouthed Yukon. And sometimes the men they took to show them the way never came back, till the people became angry and planned a great plan.

"So, when there came a ship, Old Kinoos stepped forward and said he would show the way. He was an old man then, and his hair was white; but he was unafraid. And he was cunning, for he took the ship to where the sea sucks in to the land and the waves beat white on the mountain called Romanoff. The sea sucked the ship in to where the waves beat white, and it ground upon the rocks and broke open its sides. Then came all the people of Pastolik, (for this was the plan), with their war-spears, and arrows, and some few guns. But first the Russians put out the eyes of Old Kinoos that he might never show the way again, and then they fought, where the waves beat white, with the people of Pastolik.

"Now the head-man of these Russians was Ivan. He it was, with his two thumbs, who drove out the eyes of Kinoos. He it was who fought his way through the white water, with two men left of all his men, and went away along the rim of the Great Fog Sea into the north. Kinoos was wise. He could see no more and was helpless as a child. So he fled away from the sea, up the great, strange Yukon, even to Nulato, and I fled with him.

"This was the deed my father did, Kinoos, an old man. But how did the young man, Negore?"

Once again she silenced him.

"With my own eyes I saw, at Nulato, before the gates of the great fort, and but few days gone. I saw the Russian, Ivan, who thrust out my father's eyes, lay the lash of his dog-whip upon thee and beat thee like a dog. This I saw, and knew thee for a coward. But I saw thee not, that night, when all thy people - yea, even the boys not yet hunters - fell upon the Russians and slew them all."

"Not Ivan," said Negore, quietly. "Even now is he on our heels, and with him many Russians fresh up from the sea."

Oona made no effort to hide her surprise and chagrin that Ivan was not dead, but went on:

"In the day I saw thee a coward; in the night, when all men fought, even the boys not yet hunters, I saw thee not and knew thee doubly a coward."

"Thou art done? All done?" Negore asked.

She nodded her head and looked at him askance, as though astonished that he should have aught to say.

"Know then that Negore is no coward," he said; and his speech was very low and quiet. "Know that when I was yet a boy I journeyed alone down to the place where the Yukon drowns itself in the Great Fog Sea. Even to Pastolik I journeyed, and even beyond, into the north, along the rim of the sea. This I did when I was a boy, and I was no coward. Nor was I coward when I journeyed, a young man and alone, up the Yukon farther than man had ever been, so far that I came to another folk, with white faces, who live in a great fort and talk speech other than that the Russians talk. Also have I killed the great bear of the Tanana country, where no one of my people hath ever been. And I have fought with the Nuklukyets, and the Kaltags, and the Sticks in far regions, even I, and alone. These deeds, whereof no man knows, I speak for myself. Let my people speak for me of things I have done which they know. They will not say Negore is a coward."

He finished proudly, and proudly waited.

"These be things which happened before I came into the land," she said, "and I know not of them. Only do I know what I know, and I know I saw thee lashed like a dog in the day; and in the night, when the great fort flamed red and the men killed and were killed, I saw thee not. Also, thy people do call thee Negore, the Coward. It is thy name now, Negore, the Coward."

"It is not a good name," Old Kinoos chuckled.

"Thou dost not understand, Kinoos," Negore said gently. "But I shall make thee understand. Know that I was away on the hunt of the bear, with Kamo-tah, my mother's son. And Kamo-tah fought with a great bear. We had no meat for three days, and Kamo-tah was not

strong of arm nor swift of foot. And the great bear crushed him, so, till his bones cracked like dry sticks. Thus I found him, very sick and groaning upon the ground. And there was no meat, nor could I kill aught that the sick man might eat.

"So I said, 'I will go to Nulato and bring thee food, also strong men to carry thee to camp.' And Kamo-tah said, 'Go thou to Nulato and get food, but say no word of what has befallen me. And when I have eaten, and am grown well and strong, I will kill this bear. Then will I return in honor to Nulato, and no man may laugh and say Kamo-tah was undone by a bear.'

"So I gave heed to my brother's words; and when I was come to Nulato, and the Russian, Ivan, laid the lash of his dog-whip upon me, I knew I must not fight. For no man knew of Kamo-tah, sick and groaning and hungry; and did I fight with Ivan, and die, then would my brother die, too. So it was, Oona, that thou sawest me beaten like a dog.

"Then I heard the talk of the shamans and chiefs that the Russians had brought strange sicknesses upon the people, and killed our men, and stolen our women, and that the land must be made clean. As I say, I heard the talk, and I knew it for good talk, and I knew that in the night the Russians were to be killed. But there was my brother, Kamo-tah, sick and groaning and with no meat; so I could not stay and fight with the men and the boys not yet hunters.

"And I took with me meat and fish, and the lash-marks of Ivan, and I found Kamo-tah no longer groaning, but dead. Then I went back to Nulato, and, behold, there was no Nulato - only ashes where the great fort had stood, and the bodies of many men. And I saw the Russians come up the Yukon in boats, fresh from the sea, many Russians; and I saw Ivan creep forth from where he lay hid and make talk with them. And the next day I saw Ivan lead them upon the trail of the tribe. Even now are they upon the trail, and I am here, Negore, but no coward."

"This is a tale I hear," said Oona, though her voice was gentler than before. "Kamo-tah is dead and cannot speak for thee, and I know only what I know, and I must know thee of my own eyes for no coward."

Negore made an impatient gesture.

"There be ways and ways," she added. "Art thou willing to do no less than what Old Kinoos hath done?"

He nodded his head, and waited.

"As thou hast said, they seek for us even now, these Russians. Show them the way, Negore, even as Old Kinoos showed them the way, so that they come, unprepared, to where we wait for them, in a passage up the rocks. Thou knowest the place, where the wall is broken and high. Then will we destroy them, even Ivan. When they cling like flies to the wall, and top is no less near than bottom, our men shall fall upon them from above and either side, with spears, and arrows, and guns. And the women and children, from above, shall loosen the great rocks and hurl them down upon them. It will be a great day, for the Russians will be killed, the land will be made clean, and Ivan, even Ivan who thrust out my father's eyes and laid the lash of his dog-whip upon thee, will be killed. Like a dog gone mad will he die, his

breath crushed out of him beneath the rocks. And when the fighting begins, it is for thee, Negore, to crawl secretly away so that thou be not slain."

"Even so," he answered. "Negore will show them the way. And then?"

"And then I shall be thy woman, Negore's woman, the brave man's woman. And thou shalt hunt meat for me and Old Kinoos, and I shall cook thy food, and sew thee warm parkas and strong, and make thee moccasins after the way of my people, which is a better way than thy people's way. And as I say, I shall be thy woman, Negore, always thy woman. And I shall make thy life glad for thee, so that all thy days will be a song and laughter, and thou wilt know the woman Oona as unlike all other women, for she has journeyed far, and lived in strange places, and is wise in the ways of men and in the ways they may be made glad. And in thine old age will she still make thee glad, and thy memory of her in the days of thy strength will be sweet, for thou wilt know always that she was ease to thee, and peace, and rest, and that beyond all women to other men has she been woman to thee."

"Even so," said Negore, and the hunger for her ate at his heart, and his arms went out for her as a hungry man's arms might go out for food.

"When thou hast shown the way, Negore," she chided him; but her eyes were soft, and warm, and he knew she looked upon him as woman had never looked before.

"It is well", he said, turning resolutely on his heel. "I go now to make talk with the chiefs, so that they may know I am gone to show the Russians the way."

"Oh, Negore, my man! my man!" she said to herself, as she watched him go, but she said it so softly that even Old Kinoos did not hear, and his ears were over keen, what of his blindness.

Three days later, having with craft ill-concealed his hiding-place, Negore was dragged forth like a rat and brought before Ivan - "Ivan the Terrible" he was known by the men who marched at his back. Negore was armed with a miserable bone-barbed spear, and he kept his rabbit-skin robe wrapped closely about him, and though the day was warm he shivered as with an ague. He shook his head that he did not understand the speech Ivan put at him, and made that he was very weary and sick, and wished only to sit down and rest, pointing the while to his stomach in sign of his sickness, and shivering fiercely. But Ivan had with him a man from Pastolik who talked the speech of Negore, and many and vain were the questions they asked him concerning his tribe, till the man from Pastolik, who was called Karduk, said:

"It is the word of Ivan that thou shalt be lashed till thou diest if thou dost not speak. And know, strange brother, when I tell thee the word of Ivan is the law, that I am thy friend and no friend of Ivan. For I come not willingly from my country by the sea, and I desire greatly to live; wherefore I obey the will of my master - as thou wilt obey, strange brother, if thou art wise, and wouldst live."

"Nay, strange brother," Negore answered, "I know not the way my people are gone, for I was sick, and they fled so fast my legs gave out from under me, and I fell behind."

Negore waited while Karduk talked with Ivan. Then Negore saw the Russian's face go dark, and he saw the men step to either side of him, snapping the lashes of their whips. Whereupon he betrayed a great fright, and cried aloud that he was a sick man and knew nothing, but would tell what he knew. And to such purpose did he tell, that Ivan gave the word to his men to march, and on either side of Negore marched the men with the whips, that he might not run away. And when he made that he was weak of his sickness, and stumbled and walked not so fast as they walked, they laid their lashes upon him till he screamed with pain and discovered new strength. And when Karduk told him all would be well with him when they had overtaken his tribe, he asked, "And then may I rest and move not?"

Continually he asked, "And then may I rest and move not?"

And while he appeared very sick and looked about him with dull eyes, he noted the fighting strength of Ivan's men, and noted with satisfaction that Ivan did not recognize him as the man he had beaten before the gates of the fort. It was a strange following his dull eyes saw. There were Slavonian hunters, fair-skinned and mighty-muscled; short, squat Finns, with flat noses and round faces; Siberian half-breeds, whose noses were more like eagle-beaks; and lean, slant-eyed men, who bore in their veins the Mongol and Tartar blood as well as the blood of the Slav. Wild adventurers they were, forayers and destroyers from the far lands beyond the Sea of Bering, who blasted the new and unknown world with fire and sword and clutched greedily for its wealth of fur and hide. Negore looked upon them with satisfaction, and in his mind's eye he saw them crushed and lifeless at the passage up the rocks. And ever he saw, waiting for him at the passage up the rocks, the face and the form of Oona, and ever he heard her voice in his ears and felt the soft, warm glow of her eyes. But never did he forget to shiver, nor to stumble where the footing was rough, nor to cry aloud at the bite of the lash. Also, he was afraid of Karduk, for he knew him for no true man. His was a false eye, and an easy tongue - a tongue too easy, he judged, for the awkwardness of honest speech.

All that day they marched. And on the next, when Karduk asked him at command of Ivan, he said he doubted they would meet with his tribe till the morrow. But Ivan, who had once been shown the way by Old Kinoos, and had found that way to lead through the white water and a deadly fight, believed no more in anything. So when they came to a passage up the rocks, he halted his forty men, and through Karduk demanded if the way were clear.

Negore looked at it shortly and carelessly. It was a vast slide that broke the straight wall of a cliff, and was overrun with brush and creeping plants, where a score of tribes could have lain well hidden.

He shook his head. "Nay, there be nothing there," he said. "The way is clear."

Again Ivan spoke to Karduk, and Karduk said:

"Know, strange brother, if thy talk be not straight, and if thy people block the way and fall upon Ivan and his men, that thou shalt die, and at once."

"My talk is straight," Negore said. "The way is clear."

Still Ivan doubted, and ordered two of his Slavonian hunters to go up alone. Two other men he ordered to the side of Negore. They placed their guns against his breast and waited. All waited. And Negore knew, should one arrow fly, or one spear be flung, that his death would come upon him. The two Slavonian hunters toiled upward till they grew small and smaller, and when they reached the top and waved their hats that all was well, they were like black specks against the sky.

The guns were lowered from Negore's breast and Ivan gave the order for his men to go forward. Ivan was silent, lost in thought. For an hour he marched, as though puzzled, and then, through Karduk's mouth, he said to Negore:

"How didst thou know the way was clear when thou didst look so briefly upon it?"

Negore thought of the little birds he had seen perched among the rocks and upon the bushes, and smiled, it was so simple; but he shrugged his shoulders and made no answer. For he was thinking, likewise, of another passage up the rocks, to which they would soon come, and where the little birds would all be gone. And he was glad that Karduk came from the Great Fog Sea, where there were no trees or bushes, and where men learned water-craft instead of land-craft and wood-craft.

Three hours later, when the sun rode overhead, they came to another passage up the rocks, and Karduk said:

"Look with all thine eyes, strange brother, and see if the way be clear, for Ivan is not minded this time to wait while men go up before."

Negore looked, and he looked with two men by his side, their guns resting against his breast. He saw that the little birds were all gone, and once he saw the glint of sunlight on a rifle-barrel. And he thought of Oona, and of her words: "And when the fighting begins, it is for thee, Negore, to crawl secretly away so that thou be not slain."

He felt the two guns pressing on his breast. This was not the way she had planned. There would be no crawling secretly away. He would be the first to die when the fighting began. But he said, and his voice was steady, and he still feigned to see with dull eyes and to shiver from his sickness:

"The way is clear."

And they started up, Ivan and his forty men from the far lands beyond the Sea of Bering. And there was Karduk, the man from Pastolik, and Negore, with the two guns always upon him. It was a long climb, and they could not go fast; but very fast to Negore they seemed to approach the midway point where top was no less near than bottom.

A gun cracked among the rocks to the right, and Negore heard the war-yell of all his tribe, and for an instant saw the rocks and bushes bristle alive with his kinfolk. Then he felt torn asunder by a burst of flame hot through his being, and as he fell he knew the sharp pangs of life as it wrenches at the flesh to be free.

But he gripped his life with a miser's clutch and would not let it go. He still breathed the air,

which bit his lungs with a painful sweetness; and dimly he saw and heard, with passing spells of blindness and deafness, the flashes of sight and sound again wherein he saw the hunters of Ivan falling to their deaths, and his own brothers fringing the carnage and filling the air with the tumult of their cries and weapons, and, far above, the women and children loosing the great rocks that leaped like things alive and thundered down.

The sun danced above him in the sky, the huge walls reeled and swung, and still he heard and saw dimly. And when the great Ivan fell across his legs, hurled there lifeless and crushed by a down-rushing rock, he remembered the blind eyes of Old Kinoos and was glad.

Then the sounds died down, and the rocks no longer thundered past, and he saw his tribespeople creeping close and closer, spearing the wounded as they came. And near to him he heard the scuffle of a mighty Slavonian hunter, loath to die, and, half uprisen, borne back and down by the thirsty spears.

Then he saw above him the face of Oona, and felt about him the arms of Oona; and for a moment the sun steadied and stood still, and the great walls were upright and moved not.

"Thou art a brave man, Negore," he heard her say in his ear; "thou art my man, Negore."

And in that moment he lived all the life of gladness of which she had told him, and the laughter and the song, and as the sun went out of the sky above him, as in his old age, he knew the memory of her was sweet. And as even the memories dimmed and died in the darkness that fell upon him, he knew in her arms the fulfilment of all the ease and rest she had promised him. And as black night wrapped around him, his head upon her breast, he felt a great peace steal about him, and he was aware of the hush of many twilights and the mystery of silence.