

LOST FACE

By Jack London

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It was the end. Subienkow had traveled a long trail of bitterness and horror, homing like a dove for the capitals of Europe, and here, farther away than ever, in Russian America, the trail ceased. He sat in the snow, arms tied behind him, waiting for the torture. He stared curiously before him at a huge Cossack, prone in the snow, screaming in agony. The men had finished handling the giant and turned him over to the women. That they exceeded the fiendishness of the men the man's frightful yells attested.

Subienkow looked on and shuddered. He was not afraid to die. He had carried his life too long in his hands on that weary trail from Warsaw to Nulato to shudder at mere dying. But he objected to the torture. It offended his soul. And this offense, in turn, was not due to the mere pain he must endure, but to the sorry spectacle the pain would make of him. He knew he would yell and scream as Big Ivan was yelling and screaming. He knew he would pray, and beg, and entreat, even as Big Ivan and the others that had gone before. This would not be nice. To pass out gravely and cleanly, with a smile and a jest—ah, that would have been the way! But to lose control, to have his soul upset by the pangs of the flesh, to screech and gibber like an ape, to become the veriest beast—ah, that was what was so terrible.

There had been no chance to escape. From the beginning, when he dreamed the fiery dream of Poland's independence, he had become a puppet in the hands of Fate. From the beginning at Warsaw, at St. Petersburg, in the Siberian mines, in Kamchatka, on the crazy boats of the fur thieves, Fate had been driving him to this end. Without doubt, in the foundations of the world was graved this end for him—for him, who was so fine and sensitive, whose nerves scarcely sheltered under his skin, who was a dreamer and a poet and an artist. Before he, as he, was doomed to live in raw and howling savagery and to die in this far land of night, in this dark place beyond the last boundaries of the world.

He sighed. So that thing before him, that thing that screamed was Big Ivan—Big Ivan the giant, the man without nerves, the man of iron, the Cossack turned freebooter of the seas, who was as phlegmatic as an ox, with a nervous system so low that what was pain to ordinary men was scarcely a tickle to him. Well, well, trust these Nulato Indians to find Big Ivan's nerves and trace them to the roots of his quivering soul. They were certainly doing it. Listen to that! A yell more hideously awful than any that had gone before ripped and tore through Subienkow's consciousness. It was fearful, it was inconceivable, that a man could suffer so much and yet live. Big Ivan was paying for his low order of nerves. Already he had lasted twice as long as any of the others, and still his great lungs shrieked his agony.

Subienkow felt that he could not stand the Cossack's sufferings much longer. Why didn't Ivan die? He would go mad if that screaming did not cease. But when it did cease his turn would come. He, Rudolph Subienkow, would have his nails torn out by the roots, his finger ends sliced off in strips, thin strips, a section at a time, his nose—He almost shrieked himself at thought of the horrors awaiting him. And there was Yakaga awaiting him, too, grinning at him even now in anticipation—Yakaga, whom only last week he had kicked out of the fort, and upon whose face he had laid the lash of his dog-whip, Yakaga would attend to him. Doubtlessly Yakaga was saving for him more refined tortures, more exquisite nerve racking. Ah! that must have been a good one, from the way Ivan screamed. The squaws bending over him stepped back with laughter and clapping of hands. Subienkow saw the monstrous thing that had been perpetrated, and began to laugh hysterically. The Indians looked at him in wonderment that he should laugh. But Subienkow could not stop.

This would never do. He controlled himself, the spasmodic twitches slowly dying away. He strove to think of other things, and began reading back in his own life. He remembered his mother and his father, and the little spotted pony, and the French tutor who had taught him dancing and sneaked him an old worn copy of Voltaire. Once more he saw Paris, and dreary London, and gay Vienna, and Rome. And once more he saw that wild group of youths who had dreamed, even as he, the dream of an independent Poland, with a king of Poland on the throne at Warsaw. Ah, there it was that the long trail began. Well, he had lasted longest. Once by one, beginning with the two executed at St. Petersburg, he took up the count of the passing of those brave spirits. Here, one had been beaten to death by a jailer, and there, on that blood stained highway of the exiles, where they had marched for endless months, beaten and maltreated by their Cossack guards, another had dropped by the way. Always it had been savagery—brutal, bestial savagery. They Arctic, strange stone lamps, passing in trade from tribe to tribe, no one knew whence, and once a hunting knife of English make; and here, Subienkow knew, was the school in which to learn geography. For he met Eskimos from Norton sound, from King Island and St. Lawrence Island, from Cape Prince of Wales and Point Barrow. Such places had other names, and their distances were measured in sleeps.

It had been nothing but savagery. All the years, with his heart in studios and theaters and courts, he had been hemmed in by savagery. He had purchased his life with blood. Everybody had killed. He had killed that traveler for his passports. He had proved that he was a man of parts by duelling with two Russian officers in a single day. He had had to prove himself in order to win a place among the fur thieves. He had had to win that place. Behind him lay the thousand years long road across all Siberia and Russia. He could not escape that way. The only way was ahead, across the dark and icy sea of Bering to Alaska. The way had led from savagery to deeper savagery. On the scurvy rotten ships of the fur thieves, out of food and out of water, buffeted by the interminable storms of that stormy sea, men had become animals. Thrice he had sailed east from Kamchatka. And thrice, after all manner of hardship and suffering, the survivors had come back to Kamchatka. There had been no outlet for escape, and he could not go back the way he had come, for the mines and the knot awaited him.

Again, the fourth and last time, he had sailed east. He had been with those who first found the fabled Seal islands; but he had not returned with them to share the wealth of furs in the mad orgies of Kamchatka. He had sworn never to go back. He knew that to win to those dear capitals of Europe he must go on. So he had changed ships and remained in the dark new land. His comrades were Slavonian hunters

and Russian adventurers, Mongols and Tartars and the first low hills on the northern bank, and for half Siberian aborigines; and through the savages of the a thousand miles in skin canoes, loaded to the gun trail of bitterness and horror, homing like a dove for the capitals of Europe, and here, farther away than ever, in Russian America, the trail ceased. He sat in the snow, arms tied behind him, waiting for the torture. He stared curiously before him at a huge Cossack, prone in the snow, screaming in agony. The men had finished handling the giant and turned him over to the women. That they exceeded the fiendishness of the men the man's frightful yells attested.

But always the terrible savagery had hemmed him in. Passing from ship to ship, and ever refusing to return, he had come to the ship that explored south. All down the Alaska coast they had encountered nothing but hosts of savages. Every anchorage among the heeling islands or under the frowning cliffs of the mainland had meant a battle or a storm. Either the gales blew, threatening destruction, or the war canoes came off, manned by howling savages, with the war paint on their faces, who came to learn

the world they had cut a path of blood. They had massacred whole villages that refused to furnish the way against the five-knot current of a river that ran from two to ten miles wide in a channel many fathoms deep. Malakoff decided to build the fort at Nulato. Subienkow urged to go further. But he quickly reconciled himself to Nulato. The long winter was coming on. It would be better to wait. Early the following summer, when the ice was gone, he would disappear up the Kwickpuk and work his way to the Hudson Bay company's posts. Malakoff had never heard the whisper that the Kwickpuk was the Yukon, and Subienkow did not tell him.

Came the building of the fort. It was enforced labor. The tiered walls of logs arose to the sights and groans of the Nulato Indians. The lash was laid upon their backs, and it was the iron hand of the freebooters of the sea that laid on the lash. There were Indians that ran away, and when they were caught

Subienkow laughed scornfully.

"And you shall be a slave in my house until you die."

The Pole laughed more scornfully.

"Untie my hands and feet and let us talk," he said.

The chief made the sign, and when he was loosed Subienkow rolled a cigarette and lighted it.

"This is foolish talk," said Makamuk. "There is no such medicine. It can not be. A cutting edge is stronger than any medicine."

The chief was incredulous, and yet he wavered. He had seen too many devilities of the fur thieves that worked. He could not wholly doubt.

"I will give you your life, but you shall not be a slave," he announced.

"More than that," Subienkow played his game coolly as if he were bartering for a fox skin. "It is a very great medicine. If it has saved my life many times. I want a sled and dogs and six of your hunters to travel with me down the river and give me safety to one day's sleep from Michaelovsky redoubt."

"You must live here and teach us all of your deviles," was the reply.

Subienkow shrugged his shoulders and remained silent. He blew cigarette smoke out on the icy air and curiously regarded what remained of the big Cossack, which the children were now worrying.

"That scar!" Makamuk said suddenly, pointing to the Pole's neck, where a livid mark advertised the

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Subienkow concealed his elation. He was playing a desperate game and there must be no slips. He spoke arrogantly.

"You have been slow. My medicine is offended. To make the offense clean you must give me your daughter."

He pointed to the girl, an unwholesome creature, with a cast in one eye and a bristling wolf tooth.

Makamuk was angry, but the Pole remained imperturbable, rolling and lighting another cigarette. "Make haste," he threatened. "If you are not quick I shall demand yet more."

In the silence that followed the dreary northland scene faded from before him, and he saw once more his native land, and Paris, and, once, as he glanced at the wolf toothed girl, he remembered another girl, a singer and a dancer, whom he had known when first as a youth he came to Paris.

"What do you want with the girl?" Makamuk asked.

"To go down the river with me," Subienkow glanced over her critically. "She will make a good wife, and it is an honor worthy of my medicine to be married to your blood."

Again he remembered the singer and dancer and hummed aloud a song she had taught him. He lived the old life over, but in a detached, impersonal sort of way, looking at the memory pictures of his own life as if they were pictured in a book of anybody's life.

The chief's voice, abruptly breaking the silence, started him.

"It shall be done," said Makamuk. "The girl shall go down the river with you. But be it understood that I myself strike the three blows with the ax on your neck."

"But each time I shall put on the medicine," Subienkow answered, with a show of ill concealed anxiety.

"You shall put the medicine on after each blow. Here are the hunters who shall see you do not escape. Go into the forest and gather your medicine."

Makamuk had been convinced of the worth of the medicine by the Pole's rapacity. Surely nothing less than the greatest of medicines could enable a man in the shadow of death to stand up and drive an old woman's bargain.

"Besides," whispered Yakaga, when the Pole, with his guard, had disappeared among the spruce trees, "when you have learned the medicine you can easily destroy him."

"But how can I destroy him?" Makamuk argued. "His medicine will not let me destroy him."

"There will be some part where he has not rubbed the medicine," was Yakaga's reply. "We will destroy him through that part. It may be his ears. Very well; we will thrust a spear in one ear and out the other. Or it may be his eyes. Surely the medicine will be much too strong to rub on his eyes."

The chief nodded.

"You are wise, Yakaga. If he possesses no other devil things we will then destroy him."

Subienkow did not waste time in gathering the ingredients for his medicine. He selected whatsoever came handiest, such as spruce needles, the inner bark of the willow, a strip of birch bark, and a quantity of moss berries, which he made the hunters dig up for him from beneath the snow. A few frozen roots completed his supply and he led the way back to camp.

Makamuk and Yakaga crouched beside him, noting the quantities and kinds of the ingredients he dropped into the pot of boiling water.

"You must be careful that the moss berries go in first," he explained.

"And—oh, yes, one other thing—the finger of a man. Here, Yakaga, let me cut off your finger."

But Yakaga put his hands behind him and scowled.

"Just a small finger," Subienkow pleaded.

"Yakaga, give him your finger," Makamuk demanded.

"There are plenty of fingers lying around," Yakaga grunted, indicating the human wreckage in the snow of the score of persons who had been tortured to death.

"It must be the finger of a live man," the Pole objected.

"Then shall you have the finger of a live man." Yakaga strode over to the Cossack and sliced off a finger.

"He is not yet dead," he announced, flinging the bloody trophy in the snow at the Pole's feet. "Also it is a good finger because it is large."

Subienkow dropped it into the fire under the pot and began to sing. It was a French love song that with great solemnity he sang into the brew.

"Without these words I utter into it the medicine is worthless," he explained. "The words are the chiefest strength of it. Behold, it is ready."

"Name me the words slowly, that I may know them," Makamuk commanded.

"Not until after the test. When the ax flies back three times from my neck, then will I give you the secret of the words."

"But if the medicine is not good medicine?" Makamuk queried anxiously.

Subienkow turned upon him wrathfully. "My medicine is always good. However, if it is not good, then do by me as you have done to the others. Cut me up a bit at a time, even as you have cut him up." He pointed to the Cossack. "The medicine is now cool. Thus, I rub it on my neck, saving this further medicine."

With great gravity he slowly intoned a line of "The Marseillaise," at the same time rubbing the villainous brew thoroughly into his neck.

An outcry interrupted his play acting. The giant Cossack, with a last resurgence of his tremendous vitality, had arisen to his knees. Laughter and cries of surprise and applause arose from the Nulatos as Big Ivan, a screaming horror, began flinging himself about in the snow with mighty spasms.

Subienkow was made ill by the sight, but he mastered his qualms and made believe to be angry.

"This will not do," he said. "Finish him, and then we will make the test. Here, you, Yakaga, cut his throat so that his noise ceases."

While this was being done Subienkow turned to Makamuk.

"And remember, you are to strike hard. This is not baby work. Here, take the ax and strike the log so that I can see you strike like a man."

Makamuk obeyed, striking twice, precisely and with vigor, cutting out a large chip.

"It is well." Subienkow looked about him at the circle of savage faces, that somehow seemed to symbolize the wall of savagery that had hemmed him about ever since the Tsar's police had first arrested him in Warsaw. "Take your ax, Makamuk, and stand so. I shall lie down. When I raise my hand, strike, and strike with all your might. And be careful that no one stands behind you. The medicine is good, and the ax may bounce from my neck and right out of your hands."

He looked at the two sleds, with the dogs in harness, loaded with furs and fish. His rifle lay on top of the beaver skins. The six hunters who were to act as his guard stood by the sleds.

"Where is the girl?" the Pole demanded. "Bring her up to the sleds before the test goes on."

When this had been carried out, Subienkow lay down in the snow, resting his head on the log like a tired child about to sleep. He had lived so many dreary years that he was indeed tired.

"I laugh at you and your strength, O Makamuk," he said. "Strike, and strike hard!"

He lifted his hand. Makamuk swung the ax, a broad ax for the squaring of logs. The bright steel flashed through the frosty air, poised for a perceptible instant above Makamuk's head, then descended upon Subienkow's bare neck. Clear through flesh and bone it cut, its edge biting deeply into the log beneath. The amazed savages saw the head bounce a yard away from the blood spouting trunk.

There was a great bewilderment and silence, while slowly it began to dawn in their minds that there had been no medicine. The fur thief had outwitted them. Alone of all their prisoners he had escaped the torture. That had been the stake for which he played. A great roar of laughter went up. Makamuk bowed his head in shame. The fur thief had fooled him. He had lost face before all his people. Still they continued to roar out their laughter. Makamuk turned, and with bowed head stalked away. He knew that thenceforth he would no longer be known as Makamuk. He would be Lost Face—the record of his shame would be with him until he died, and whenever the tribes gathered in the spring for the salmon or in the summer for the trading, the story would pass back and forth across the camp fires of how the fur thief died peacefully at a single stroke by the hand of Lost Face. "Who was Lost Face?" he could hear in anticipation some insolent young buck demand. "Oh, Lost Face," would be the answer, "he who once was Makamuk, in the days before he cut off the fur thief's head."



the bloody virtues of the sea rovers' gunpowder. South, south they had coasted, clear to the myth-land of California. Here, it was said, were Spanish adventurers who had fought their way up from Mexico. He had had hopes of those Spanish adventurers. Escaping to them, the rest would have been easy—a year or more—what did it matter more or less?—and he would win to Mexico; then a ship, and Europe would be his. But they had met no Spaniards. Only

had they encountered the same impregnable wall of savagery. The denizens of the confines of the world, painted for war, had driven them back from the shores. At last, when one boat was cut off and every man killed, the commander had abandoned the quest and sailed back to the north.

The years had passed. In 1833 he had served under Tebenoff when Michaelovsky redoubt was built. He had spent two years in the Kuskokwin country. Two summers, in the month of June, he had managed to be at the head of Kotzebue sound. Here, at this time, the tribes assembled for barter. Here were to be found spotted deerskins from Siberia, ivory from the Diomedes, walrus skins from the shores of the Arctic, strange stone lamps, passing in trade from tribe to tribe, no one knew whence, and once a hunting knife of English make; and here, Subienkow remained, or Subienkow and Big Ivan, if

that whimpering, moaning thing in the snow could be called Big Ivan. Subienkow caught Yakaga grinning at him. There was no gainsaying Yakaga. The mark of the lash was still on his face. After all, Subienkow could not blame him, but he disliked the thought of what Yakaga would do to him. He thought of appealing to Makamuk, the head chief, but his judgment signed for Makamuk and that an interpreter who knew the coast dialect should be brought.

"Oh, Makamuk," he said, "I am not minded to die. I am a great man, and it were foolishness for me to die. In truth, I shall not die. I am not like these other carion"—he looked at the thing that once had been Big Ivan and stirred it contemptuously with his toe—"I am too wise to die. Behold I have a great medicine. I alone know this medicine. Since I am not going to die, I shall exchange this medicine with

Yakaga, who committed an offense against my medicine in that he did not at once accept my terms. Behold, I now demand more. I want one hundred beaver skins." (Makamuk sneered.) "I want one hundred pounds of dried fish." (Makamuk nodded, for fish were plentiful and cheap.) "I want two sleds, one for me and one for my furs and fish. And my rifle must be returned to me. If you do not like the price, in a little while the price will grow."

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