The Spirit of Crow Butte

John G. Neihardt

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SHOULD a European fashion a personification of Martyrdom, it would have a white face. This is a reproach to the blind egotism of individual races. There is a story that the old bucks tell to the staring youths huddled about the winter fires, which is a simple plea for the brotherhood of humanity pale and swarthy. A noble deed has many whispering tongues, and becomes a part of nature like the wind, and the Omaha from whom I had this simple legend knew not whence it came; it had crept into the varied tongues of the scattered tribes to be an incentive to their youths.

On the desolate plains of Western Nebraska there rises from the banks of the White River a steep butte of clay and sandstone. Should one take the winding path, by which alone it can be scaled, and clamber to the summit, he would be terrified by the loneliness of the place, with its sun−bleached bowlders and its moaning pines. Upon all sides, save where the tortuous path struggles upward, the yellow butte drops almost vertically to the sandy plain dotted with bunch grass, that sweeps off on all sides in a level, unbroken stretch to where the pure blue sky dims the vision; to the very gates of night and day. One sitting there could not but believe that there, at least, Time forgets its fever and sleeps. There is a spell upon the place, and the wind, the crow and the coyote make the only sounds that break it.

Many summers ago, when the white man to the Indian was yet a name that dwelt in the mysterious regions of the rising sun, a small band of Crows came scurrying across these prairies, followed by a larger band of Sioux. There was little hope for the Crows, for their ponies were jaded with a recent buffalo hunt, and the Sioux steadily gained upon them. But a cry of joy went up from the hard−pressed band as they beheld the one rugged way leading to the summit of the butte. Here was momentary safety, at least. So dismounting at the foot of the butte, which a horse could not climb, they barely had time to send an arrow into the heart of each weary pony, and rush up the steep path, before the Sioux were upon them, howling in their baffled anger.

There was no further pursuit. A small band once in possession of the butte could hold it with ease against a horde of warriors. Yet there was a greater, grimmer enemy awaiting them upon that desolate summit. Starvation was there, and the awful torture of thirst beneath the glare of a prairie sun! When the small band had clambered to the top, they turned and looked below. There they beheld their enemies making ready to camp at the foot of the path. They looked about them and saw death grinning in the desolation of the shelterless summit, strewn with its bare rocks, where the hardy soap weed could scarcely struggle upward.

Before them was the torture of thirst and hunger; behind them the more terrible torture of the Sioux, and they knew their enemies too well to hope for their withdrawal from the foot of the butte. The day passed, and the sun dropped suddenly beneath its yellow veil of plain, leaving scarcely a brief twilight in its wake; and the Crows looked wistfully over the darkening prairie, across which they would never again urge their fleet ponies in the dusty path of the bison.

When the night fell they made themselves a cheerless camp, and, gathering twigs from beneath the pine trees, they built a fire that had no gladness in it. Then, sitting about the flame that lit up the despair of their swarthy faces, they held a council.

There was but one way in which the band could be saved. By cutting their buffalo robes into strips and binding these together, they could lower themselves, one by one, to the plain below.

Yet the Sioux were watchful, and would quickly detect their absence, unless some show of fight were kept up; otherwise, there would be little chance for a small band on foot to flee before the well−mounted Sioux. So it was decided that someone must remain upon the butte to keep the fires burning and to hurl an occasional arrow or stone into the enemy's camp, until the fleeing band should be beyond vision.

Who would die upon the butte to save his band? To remain meant death. The desperate Crows sat and gazed questioningly at each other through the weird glare of the flame, and, save for the wall of the pines, there was silence. In his own rude and picturesque manner an Indian loves his home, his squaw, and his brown−faced papooses; but more than these he loves the freedom of the plains, the dash of the hunt, the ecstasy of fight all that is unrestrained he loves. It were easy for him to die with the shout of the foe in his ears; for this requires animal fury rather than courage. But to suffer the slow, inglorious death of starvation and thirst upon a lonely butte, whence he could gaze, like one dis−inherited, upon his broad free plains this was hard.

So each stared at the other while the pines groaned piteously like a starving man, and the uncertain fire made the darkness weird. But suddenly, out of the painful silence, a voice spoke:

"I am a young man," it began hoarsely, as though issuing from a throat at which a cold, invisible hand was clutching.

The warriors raised their eyes from staring at the flames, and sought the circle of anguished faces where the firelight danced. They saw the face of a youth made terrible with anguish and the shadow. The lips quivered with unspoken words, and in the eyes a cold terror glittered.

"I am a young man," the voice continued; and it seemed the articulate sorrow of the wind. "My home is sweet to me; I love to hear the women crooning to the children. I shall never hear them croon to mine. I love to watch the dancing of the braves. I shall never dance with them again. The growing maize sings sweetly in the summer winds. There is one whose ears shall be dumb." The voice wailed into silence like a fitful night wind, and the listening braves shivered with a vague terror. They knew the meaning of the young man's words.

The band arose, and over the youth performed the strange rites for the dead. Then they fell to constructing a rope of their blankets. They worked swiftly and silently; but the young man stared distractedly into the blaze, and his face was the face of a corpse, animated with terror. Did some broad, brown face weave itself amid the fantastic leapings of the flame, that he gazed so intently? Did the crackling of the burning twigs sing to him of the merry camp fires of his people?

Suddenly he raised his eyes from the embers and looked about him. He was alone! Then an overpowering sense of loneliness rushed upon him. Running to the edge of the butte, he found the rope of buffalo hide hanging from a jutting ledge and swaying in the night wind. He strained his ears to catch some faint echo of farewell from fleeing foot−steps. The pines moaned.

He endeavored with painful gaze to form some dim moving shadow from the impenetrable night that swallowed his fleeing brothers. He shivered with the terror of the dusk.

Then again he found the hanging rope. Should he let himself down and run, run, run out of this weird place where black spirits lurked? With a quick movement, he grasped the rope, and, wrenching it from the ledge, hurled it from him into the darkness!

He was a dead man. A dead man is not afraid of death. He must keep the fires burning, that the Sioux might be outwitted.

So he went back to the lonely fires and replenished them that they leaped far up into the night. But when the stars grew paler with the coming of the dawn, he again stood upon the edge of the butte and scanned the prairie, slowly emerging from the shadow, and saw nothing but the monotonous sweep of yellow plain, hemmed with the faint line of light that forewent the day. Days passed, and when the Sioux no longer noted signs of life upon the butte, they struck their camp and rode away.

Many times since then the plains have thundered with the bellowing of the bulls. Many times have the snows drifted from the north, and the corrosive seasons have reduced to dust the skeleton of the nameless brave. Yet if you should ride to the place in that mysterious hour when light and shadow struggle and the broad white Day swoops down upon the plain; and should you gaze through the half light of the early morning upon the yellow summit of Crow Butte, you would see, some say, a lonely figure with hand at brow, peering with strained and anxious gaze into the distance. And you would hear a wail like that of a man who dies of thirst and hunger.

The form may be only a sunflower, heavy and bent with seed, clothed in the magic of the shadow.

The wail may be the wail of the pines as the morning winds awaken.

Yet I love to think differently.