

The End of the Dream

John G. Neihardt

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"I taught thee nothing is a trifle."
Tupper.

A MAN who has the deeper sense of God finds nothing unimportant; he who imputes insignificance to the most inconspicuous of objects or aspirations, not only belittles his God, but clearly defines the capacity of his being.

It is merely subjective egotism that gives size to the object. Does not the small boy's careless step upon an ant hill mark an epoch in insect history?

God is no trifler.

There is as much of the epic in the unlyred and futile toil of the tumble bug as there is in the classic hopelessness of the endeavor of Sisyphus. It cannot be proven without the aid of egotism that the crushing of a worm under foot is less laden with meaning to the universe than the decimation of a phalanx. The failure of the superstitious hope of an unhistoric savage is of as much importance to eternity as the calamitous miscarriage of a diplomat's scheme!

This is a simple tale of failure.

The old woman Gunthai had nothing but a past over which she brooded, and a son upon whom she doted. Had she been able to write the latter in the letters of that tongue which did not come to the prairie until many moons after her death, she would have written it with a "u," for her son was the day to her; his coming was the morning and his going was the sunset. When he laughed, there was summer in the wretched little tepee; when he cried the snows drifted about the mother heart.

Winter and summer the old woman sat in her lodge, her back bent with the burdens of many seasons, and her face seamed with many memories, yet stern and expressionless, as the face of one who has followed a long trail and cannot see its end, though the sun be falling.

All day she would sit in her lodge weaving baskets of willow; these she exchanged with her tribesmen for the meat and robes which had been furnished in abundance by her brave until the arrow of a Sioux brought him low.

Her little lad, whom she tenderly called Nu Zhing (Little Man), would lie long hours before her, resting his chin upon his little brown fists, watching the hands of his mother weave the twigs into form with marvelous skill, as it seemed to him.

And often the mother would forget the unwoven basket with gazing into his big black eyes, for in them she could read great deeds that were to be done after many unborn moons had died.

Then she would tell him tales of his father, tales that were noisy with the snarl of drums, the twang of bow thongs, the shriek of arrows, the thunder of hoofs. But there was no responsive glitter in the eyes of the boy. His heart was

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not a warrior's, and the mother, seeing this, sighed and fell to work with nervous haste.

And the days of the sun and the snow wove themselves into years, until Nu Zhing had reached that time when boyhood deepens into manhood, and yet as the mother looked upon her son, she found him scarcely taller than a weak man's bow. His legs were short and bowed, his hips narrow, and upon shoulders of abnormal breadth sat his monstrous, shaggy head. It was as if he were the visible body of a black spirit's joke, save for his lustrous eyes, that were like two stars that burn big in the air of evening through a film of mist.

And thus it was that when Nu Zhing would pass through the village, those who were still foolish with youth jeered at the boy, calling his name in contempt the name which his mother had given in love, "Little man!" But the old men and women only shook their heads and pitied Gunthai in silence.

At such times the lad would walk on sullen and silent. He lived in a little world of his own, which was isolated from the great world by the unkindness of his people, like a range of frozen hills. And in this small world there were but three dwellers Gunthai, himself and one other. That other was a despised little cripple, and her name was Tabea (Frog).

These three, and about them the chromatic glory of dreams, like a sunrise that lingers, this was the world of Nu Zhing.

All day among the quiet of the summer hills, Nu Zhing and Tabea played together. He telling the great, indefinite deeds that he would do in that big, mysterious Sometime, when the days would be pregnant with wonders! For in his soul the strong pulse of uncertain and lofty resolve bounded, and as he peered into the future, lo! it was vast, yet dim with misty possibilities like a broad stretch of prairie expanding under the new moon.

And Tabea, with all of her crooked little body, listened attentively and believed even more than she heard. This is the way of those who love.

One day when the last white footsteps of the winter had vanished from the coldest valley, the old woman Gunthai called her boy to her side.

"It is the time," she said, "the time is ripe with summers. Nu Zhing must touch no meat for four days; then he must go to the hill where the visions come, that he may know what is to be for him in the light of the unborn moons."

So Nu Zhing ate no meat for four days, and when the fourth evening had come, as the fires roared up among the circled lodges, he passed through the village, and wondering took his way to the hill of dreams.

It was the time when the valleys are loud with the song of frogs, and when the earth begins to learn anew the pleasant lesson of the sun.

When he had stopped breathless with toiling up the long incline (for he was weak with fasting, he turned and looked back upon the jumbled village, and saw, indistinctly through the mist of the evening, his mother standing before the door of her lodge, straining her gaze that she might see her boy for the last time, climbing the height where the dream awaited, which should send him back a man with a future big in deeds.

Then Nu Zhing climbed to the summit of the hill and watched the west pass from brilliant colors into dun, and the darkness come with the stars.

There are those whose souls should not have been born into bodies that must battle for a breathing space. Some souls should have remained a part of the great, kind pulse of the universe, a part of the wind, the spirit of a

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flower's fragrance, a vibration in a ray of light, a factor in a bird's joy. Such souls never understand their surroundings and languish into pathetic failure.

Such a soul warmed the small body of Nu Zhing. In the light of a thin moon the far hills whitened. The big stars glowed kindly like the camp fires of a people that are known to be friendly. The night wind talked. Attentive to these, Nu Zhing forgot the reason of his coming, and lulled by the many pleasant sounds of the prairie night, fell asleep, and was awakened by the pale, damp dawn.

Then he ran down the hill, and as he passed through the village, the old women, some busy about the steaming kettle, others stooped beneath the load of fuel, shook their heads wisely, and said: "Gunthai's boy has had no vision. Not thus do they return who dream great dreams."

In the doorway of her lodge Gunthai stood awaiting the approach of her son. Her body, which was wont to be bent like a bow upon which a heavy hand is laid in the stress of battle, was erect and vibrant as is the bow when the arrow has sped like a purpose. Upon her leathery, wrinkled face dwelt the glimmer of an inner illumination. Only the flesh of her face was old; the light was young. Hope is a youth.

As the lad approached, the tenseness of expectation held the old woman's tongue, and her question came from her eyes. "What has Nu Zhing dreamed?"

"I saw the stars that were like the eyes of friends," said the boy, "and I heard the wind as it talked to itself in the gulches. I slept and awoke, and lo! the sun was teaching gladness to the hills."

Many seasons sit lightly upon a form when Hope sits with them. But Despair is heavy, and again the weight of many years bent the shoulders of the mother. When the sun leaves a cloud of glory, it leaves it a mass of murk. Thus passed the light from the wrinkled face of Gunthai.

There was a sigh in her voice as she spoke; a sigh like that of a wind that is heavy with rain: "There should have come a dream loud with the noise of battles and shrill with the flight of arrows; thus did your father dream."

So Nu Zhing went a second and a third time to the hill of dreams, and even a fourth time went he, and four is a magic number. Still the last answer that his mother heard was like the first. And on the fourth day the heart of the old mother was sore with sorrow, and all that night she did not sleep, but wept and moaned: "How shall Gunthai be comforted when her eyes are dim and her fingers stiff? Her son shall not be mighty in the hunt or the battle, for he has had no dream."

The lad, awakened in the night, heard the moaning of his mother, and knew that he was the cause of so much sorrow. And in his breast grew a great pang of soul-hunger that would not go away. Even with the giant joy of the sunrise, it did not pass away.

In the early light Nu Zhing went out of the village, but his heart was heavy. As he walked, lo! everything was sad except the sun, and the light of its gladness deepened the shadow of his sorrow. The sound of the wind moving in the bunch grass of the hillside was like the faint cry of a great pain. At length he threw himself down and buried his face in the grass. The despair of those who dream day dreams was upon him. There was night in his heart. His small body shook with sobs. A long while he lay thus, a lump of sorrow. He did not hear the careful footstep beside him.

A fallen dream is the most desolate of ruins. Yet he who has dreamed no day dreams has also never built. Every edifice was once an air castle in a feverish brain. Little by little a sterner material was put in place of the dream stone and the dream timber, until the last insubstantial portion was replaced, and lo! a reality!

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The most mathematical of you who read have dreamed day dreams. Have you not built houses of the future, whose corridors were scintillant with tints of sunrise? And when you explored your house of the future there was a strange music that fled through the mysterious chambers. One night you went to sleep, glad of your dreams, and you awoke and found your castle fallen. Was it not so? Then no doubt you buried your face in the ruins and wept.

And the ruin in which you wept was as great as Ninevah, as worthy of chronicle as Babylon, for are you not an integral part of the universe?

Nu Zhingá wept among ruins, and although they would compare with your ruins as the tepee to the palace, they were as real as yours.

At length Nu Zhingá raised his head from the grass and saw Tabea sitting before him with pity in her eyes and in the attitude of her crooked little body. Without a word they stared each into the face of the other, and as Nu Zhingá looked, the desolate gray of the world began to develop its wonted brilliance of color, as though the union of their tears produced a prison.

Is femininity simply an attribute of the female? It is pleasant to think of it as one of the fundamental principles of the Cosmos: a tender, patient throb in the pulsing aether that folds about the worlds, a spirit, perhaps, that lives not only in the good woman in which it culminates, but is present in the unfolding of a blossom, beats with love in the maturing seed, and breathes with subtle influence in the south-wind. To this spirit let us attribute all the kindness and the pity which wage a gentle but efficient war with the stern and pitiless in Nature, which is the masculine.

This universal spirit dwelt even in the ugly little body of Tabea. And the sunlight entered the heart of Nu Zhingá. Even though, when the two outcasts entered the village, the youths trooped behind them shouting: "No dream! No good!" Yet the sunlight did not go away. For upon one hand walked again the dreams of Nu Zhingá, and upon the other hand walked Tabea.

One day in the time of the gathering of maize, when the brown hills shivered with the first frost, the voice of a crier was heard through the village calling the braves to battle, for the big chief of the Omahas would lead a war party against the Sioux.

So the old woman, Gunthai, took down the weapons of her fallen brave from the side of the tepee, where they had hung in idleness many moons. She strung the long unbent bow with a thong of buckskin and re-tipped the arrows.

Then she wept over them and blessed them with weird songs, and calling Nu Zhingá to her side, placed them in his hands, and said these words: "Bring them back red with the blood of the Sioux!" The youth took them, wondering why it was so very great a deed to kill.

When the war party rode out of the village, Nu Zhingá rode with them, and there were two who climbed to the top of the highest hill and shading their eyes with their hands, watched the braves disappear in the distance. They were Gunthai and Tabea, and the hopes of each were great, for might not even Nu Zhingá do great deeds? Such things had happened.

After many days the returning band rode up the valley that rang with the song of victory. But when it rode into the village a cry of derision went up against Nu Zhingá, the squaw-hearted, for in the battle with the Sioux his pony had fallen with an arrow in its breast, and when the Omahas returned after their pursuit of the flying enemy, they found him crying like a squaw over the carcass of the animal.

When the people heard this, an angry cry like that of a wind in a thicket passed over the assembled village. "Let him work with the squaws!" they cried, and the unanimous cry of a people is a law.

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So Nu Zhing, the squaw-hearted, carried water and wood with the squaws. The old woman Gunthai, seeing how more than woman-hearted her boy had grown, sat in her lodge weaving the baskets of willow but the hope of her heart was gone. Oh, how she had dreamed of the prowess of her little man! How he would be mighty among his people; mighty with the arm that is strong and pitiless a slayer of enemies. But now And the old woman's thought would check itself at that barren gulch in the mysterious hills through which death comes like a blast of biting winds, for she could see no further.

So the suns came and went, but there was night for her in the brightest noon; the seasons passed, but for her there was cold even in the glad midsummer.

One day in the time of the cubs (December) it happened that a child of the village was stricken with a strange sickness. A fierce heat like that of the time of the sunflowers (August) set its blood ablaze its eyes glowed with the brightness of a burning thing. Its dry lips muttered strange words, and those who listened trembled. And after some time the whole burning body of the child became a mass of sores.

It was then that Wash ka he, the big medicine man, came to the lodge of the sick, and sang his most potent songs and performed his most mysterious rites; but one day the child leaped to its feet and stared at the wall with eyes that were glazed with terror, then shrieked and fell back into its blankets.

And when the winter crept into the burning blood of the child, they buried it upon a hill above the village, and the wonder of the people was great.

But the end was not yet. Another crept into his blankets, stricken with the same sickness; then another and another, until from many lodges came the moans of the afflicted. Those who dwelt in the lodges where the scourge entered fled from their stricken kinsmen as from the visible body of Death. They, who could laugh back at the challenge of the Sioux, quailed before the subtle creeping of this invisible foe! They, who were as yet untouched by the unseen hand, huddled, terrified and speechless about their fires, in the light of which they stared at each other, and found each face ghastly as though it were a mirror of their dread. In the stillness of their bated breaths, they heard the lonesome monotony of the winter wind and the swish of the drifting snows through the drone of which pierced like arrows of ice the occasional shrieks of the deserted dying or those who battled with grotesque terrors in the giddy whirl of feverish delirium!

With trembling fingers the women bound blankets closely across the doors of the lodges, in the hope of barring out the black spirit that wandered about the village.

Vain hope! Through the thick walls of the strongest lodge crept the insidious spirit.

One night the sound of a voice crying through the storm beat into the lodges: "Wash ka he has cried to Wakunda (God) and lo! Wash ka he has dreamed! Only a tuft of hair from the head of the white bison can save us! So spoke the dream to Wash ka he. Who will seek the white bison?"

It was as if the winter wind had found words. The people huddled about their fires, knew the voice to be that of the big medicine man, Wash ka he, yet they did not move nor speak. The bravest had grown weak as the child at the back of a squaw.

That night Nu Zhing, lying in the lodge of his mother, heard the cry that came out of the storm. And when he slept he dreamed. He had walked far across the white prairie and his legs ached with toil and his heart with despair. Then there broke upon his dream a mighty roar and lo! he saw charging down upon him the white bison, tossing the crusted snow from its lowered horns.

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"Tae ska! Tae ska!" (white bison) Nu Zhingia cried, and was wakened with his own cry, and it was the time when the east pales.

Nu Zhingia arose from his blankets, took down the bow and arrows of his father, wrapped himself in a buffalo robe, called his tame wolf, which was the only living thing which was not ashamed to be his companion, and strode out into the prairie.

To him the dream was an omen. Might he not find the white bison and thus drive Death from among his people? As he walked, the hope which had ever crept like a slow music through his blood, grew into the swaying fury of the battle song. He timed his brisk steps with a joyous chant that echoed in the frosty valleys. He would find the white bison. Then his people would shout his name without derision. Gunthai would be glad! Tabea would be glad. Tabea! The word was music.

* * * *

But meanwhile in the village thicker and thicker fell the invisible arrows of the terror. And within the lodges where they fell dwelt the cry of agony and delirium and the muffled shriek of death.

The old woman Gunthai and the cripple Tabea were not spared. The old and the young, the weak and the strong, the brave and the cowardly, found no spell with which to ward away the stroke of the hidden Hand.

At length the fear of the tribe grew into frenzy. It needed but an incident to lash it into madness.

One evening as the night crept westward across the hills, a brave leaped upon a pony, and yelling, sent the frightened animal flying up the valley. He was fleeing from the curse that hung over the village.

Then the frenzy grew into madness.

The people rushed from the lodges and fighting for the nearest pony of the herd, fled after the lone rider that had disappeared into the night. Those who were too weak or unfortunate to gain the back of a pony hung to the manes and were dragged in the snow until their grips failed, when they ran with frantic shrieks after their disappearing tribesmen.

The valley leading from the village became choked with the fleeing people. Many of the stricken leaped from their blankets and followed in the wild rout until their knees weakened and their brains swam, when they lay shrieking until they died.

From the deserted village the cries of the helpless followed the unhearing refugees, who fled as the bison flee when the pitiless hunter follows. The path of the tribe was marked by the dying and helpless. Fainter and fainter grew the yelling, until it was swallowed up in the wind that lashed the spraying snow.

When morning looked over the hills it found no smoke arising from the silent lodges. Only the dead were there; the dead and the winter.

* * * *

Many days after the flight of the tribe, it happened that a lone form topped the hill above the village and looked into the valley. Then with slow and halting step it took its way down the hillside.

The form was short and bent as with the strain of a long and hopeless trail. At its heels a gaunt wolf followed. The form walked about the village, and there were two lodges into which it peered. In one was the body of Gunthai; in

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the other, that of Tabea. Both were frozen, and about each the snows had drifted.

Before the door of the last lodge the form moaned and fell upon its face in the snow. And over all the valley there were but two sounds the wail of the winter wind and the howl of a lone wolf.