The Last Thunder Song

John G. Neihardt

Table of Contents

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IT is an ancient custom to paint tragedy in blood tints. This is because men were once merely animals, and have not as yet been able to live down their ancestry.

The stroke of a dagger is a caress beside the throb of hopeless days. Life aches! The living will tell you that; but the dead seem to be satisfied.

There is no greater tragedy than the fall of a dream. Napoleon dreamed; so did a savage. It is the same.

I know of the scene of a great tragedy. Very few have recognized it as such; there was so little noise along with it. It happened at the Omaha Indian agency, which is situated on the Missouri River, some seventy miles above the city of Omaha.

The summer of 1900 debilitated all thermal adjectives. It was not hot; it was "Saharical!" It would hardly have been hyperbole to say that the Old Century lay dying of a fever. The untilled hills of the reservation thrust themselves up into the August sunshine like the emaciated joints of one bed−ridden. The land lay yellow as the skin of a fever patient, except in rare spots where the melancholy corn struggled heartlessly up a hillside, making a blotch like a bed−sore.

The blood of the prairie was impoverished, and the Sky would give no drink with which to fill the dwindling veins. When one wished to search the horizon for the cloud which was not there, he did it with a squint from beneath an arched hand. The small whirlwinds, that awoke like sudden fits of madness in the sultry air, rearing yellow columns of dust into the sky, these alone relieved the monotony of dazzle.

Every evening the clouds rolled flashing about the horizon and thundered back into the night. They were merely taunts like the holding of a cool cup just out of reach of a fevered mouth. And the clear nights passed, bringing dewless dawns, till the ground cracked like a parched lip.

The annual Indian pow−wow was to be ended prematurely that year, for the sun beat uninvitingly upon the flat bottom where the dances were held, and the Indians found much comfort in the shade of their summer tepees.

But when it was noised about that upon the next day the old medicine man, Mah−ho−wari (Passing Cloud) would dance potent dances and sing a thunder song with which to awaken the drowsy thunder spirits to their duty of rain−making, then the argument of the heat became feeble. So the next morning the bronze head of every Indian tepee−hold took his pony, his dogs, his squaw, and his papooses of indefinite number to the pow−wow ground.

In addition to these, the old men carried with them long memories and an implicit faith. The young men, who had been away to Indian school, and had succeeded to some extent in stuffing white souls into their bronze skins, carried with them curiosity and doubt, which if properly united may beget derision.

The old men went to a shrine: the young men went to a show. When a shrine becomes a show, the World advances a step; and that is the benevolence of natural law.

About the open space in which the dances were held an oval covering of willow boughs had been built, beneath which the Indians lounged in sweating groups. Slowly about the various small circles went the cumbersome red−stone pipes. To one listening, drowsed with the intense sunshine, the buzzle and mutter and snarl of the gossiping Omahas seemed the grotesque echoes from a vanished age. Between the fierce dazzle of the sun and the sharply contrasting blue shade, there was but a line of division, yet a thousand years lay like a sea between one gazing in the sun and those sitting in the shadow. It was as if God had flung down a bit of the young world's twilight into the midst of the old world's noon. Here lounged the human masterpieces of the toiling Centuries a Yankee; there sat the remnant of a people as primitive as Israel; yet the white man looked on with the contempt of familiarity.

Before ten o'clock everybody had arrived, and his family with him. A little group composed of the Indian agent, the Agency Physician, the Mission preacher and a newspaper man down from the city for reportorial purposes, waited and chatted, sitting upon a ragged patch of available shadow.

"These Omahas are an exceptional race," the preacher was saying in his ministerial tone of voice, "an exceptional race."

The newspaperman mopped his face, lit a cigarette, and nodded assent with a hidden meaning twinkling in his eye.

"Quite exceptional!" he said, tossing his head in the direction of an unusually corpulent bunch of steaming, sweating bronze men and women. "God, like lesser master−musicians, has not confined himself to grand opera, it seems." He took a long pull at his cigarette, and sent his next words out in a cloud of smoke. "This particular creation savors somewhat of opera bouffe!"

With clerical unconcern, the preacher mended the broken thread of his discourse.

"An exceptional race in many ways. The Omaha is quite as honest as the white man!"

"That is a truism!" The pencil−pusher drove this observation between the minister's words like a wedge.

"In his natural state he was much more so," uninterruptedly resumed the minister; he was used to continuous discourse. "I have been told by many of the old men that an Indian could leave his tepee unguarded for months at a time, and on returning would find his most valuable possessions untouched. I tell you, sirs, the Indian is like a prairie flower that has been transplanted from the blue sky and the summer sun and the pure winds into the steaming, artificial air of the hot−house. A glass roof is not the blue sky. Man's talent is not God's genius; that is why you are now looking upon a perverted growth. Look into an Indian's face, and observe the ruins of what was once manly dignity, indomitable energy, masterful prowess! When I look into one of these faces, I have the same thoughts as, when traveling in Europe, I look upon the ruins of Rome. Everywhere broken arches, fallen columns, tumbled walls! Yet through these, as through a mist, one could discern the magnificence of the living city. So in looking into one of these faces which are merely ruins in another sense. They were once as noble and beautiful as "

In his momentary search for an eloquent simile, the minister paused.

"As pumpkin pies which a careless cook has overbaked!" added the newspaperman, as he whipped out his note book and pencil to jot down this brilliant thought, for he had conceived a very witty "story," which he would "pound out" for the Sunday edition.

"Well," said the Agency Physician, finally sucked into the whirlpool of discussion, "it seems to me there is no room for crowing on either side. Indians are pretty much like white men; livers and kidneys and lungs, and that

sort of thing. Slight difference in the pigment under the skin. I've looked into the machinery of both species and find just as much room for a soul in one as the other.

"And both souls will go upward," added the minister.

"Like different grades of tobacco," observed the Indian Agent; "the smoke of each goes up in the same way."

"Just so," said the reporter; "but let us 'cut out' the metaphysics. I wonder when this magic cuggy is going to begin his humid evolutions. Lamentable, isn't it, that such institutions as rain prayers should exist on the very threshold of the twentieth century!"

"I think," returned the minister, "that the twentieth century has no serious intentions of eliminating God. This medicine man's prayer, in my belief, is as sacred as the prayer of any churchman. The difference between Wakunda and God is merely orthographical."

"But," insisted the cynical young man from the city, "I had not been taught to think of God as being one who forgets. Do you know what I would do if I had no confidence in my God's executive ability?"

Taking the subsequent silence for a question, the young man answered: "Why, I would take a day off and whittle one out of wood."

"A youth's way is the wind's way," quoth the minister with a paternal air.

"And the thoughts of youth are long, long thoughts," returned the reporter; "but what is all this noise about?"

A buzz of expectant voices had grown at one end of the oval and had spread contagiously throughout the elliptical strip of shade. For with slow, majestic step, the medicine man, Mah−ho−wari, entered the enclosure and walked toward the center. The fierce sun emphasized the brilliancy of the old man's garments and glittered upon the profusion of trinkets, the magic heirlooms of the medicine man. It was not the robe nor the dazzling trinkets that caught the eye of one acquainted with Mah−ho−wari. It was the youthful erectness of his figure, for he had been bent with years, and many vertical suns had shown upon the back of the old man since his face had been turned toward the ground.

But now with firm step and form rigidly erect, he walked. Any sympathetic eye could easily read the thoughts that passed through the decrepid body like an elixir, infusing youth. Now in his feeble years would come his greatest triumph. To−day he would sing with greater power than ever he had sung. Wakunda would hear his cry. The rains would come. Then the white man would be stricken with wonder, possibly with belief! Already his heart sang before his lips. In spite of the hideous painting of his shrunken face, the light of triumph shone there like the reflection of a great fire.

Slowly he approached the circle of drummers, who sat in the glaring center of the ellipse of sunlight. It was all as if the First Century had awakened like a ghost, and stood in the very doorway of the Twentieth!

When Mah−ho−wari had approached within a yard of the drums, he stopped, and raising his arms and his eyes to the cloudless sky, uttered a low cry like a wail of supplication. Then the drums began to throb with that barbaric music as old as the world. Tum−tum−um−um, tum−tum−um−um, a sound like the throbbing of a fevered temple with a recurring snarl like the warning of a rattlesnake.

With a slow, majestic bending of the knees and an alternate lifting of his feet, the medicine man danced in a circle about the snarling drums. Then like a faint wail of winds toiling up a wooded bluff, his thunder song began. The drone and whine of the mysterious, untranslatable words pierced the drowse of the day, living for a moment with

the echoes of the drums in the surrounding hills, and languished into silence. At intervals the old man raised his face, radiant with fanatic ecstasy, to the meridian glare of the sun, and the song swelled to a supplicating shout.

Faster and faster the old man moved about the circle, louder and wilder grew the song. Those who watched from the shade were absorbed in an intense silence, which, with the drowse of the day, made every sound a paradox. The old men forgot their pipes and sat motionless.

Suddenly, at one end of the oval covering grew the sound of laughter! At first an indefinite sound like the spirit of merriment entering a capricious dream of sacred things. Then it grew and spread until it was no longer merriment, but a loud jeer of derision.

It startled the old men from the intentness of their watching. They looked up and were speechless with awe. The young men were jeering this, the holiest rite of their fathers.

Slower and slower the medicine man danced. Fainter grew the song and ceased abruptly. With one quick glance, Mah−ho−wari saw the shattering of his hopes. He glanced at the sky, but saw no swarm of angry spirits to avenge such sacrilege. Only the blaze of the sun: the glitter of the arid zenith!

In that one moment the temporary youth of the old man died out. His shoulders drooped to their wonted position. His limbs tottered. He was old again!

It was the Night stricken heart−sick at the laughter of the Dawn. It was the audacious Present jeering at the Past, tottering with years. At that moment, the impudent, cruel, brilliant youth called Civilization snatched the halo from the gray hairs and wrinkles of patriarchal Ignorance. Light flouted the rags of Night. A clarion challenge shrilled across the years!

Never before in all the myriad moons had such a thing occurred. It was too great a cause to produce an effect of grief or anger. It stupified. The old men and women sat motionless. They could not understand. With uneven step and with eyes that saw nothing, Mah−ho−wari passed from among his kinsmen and tottered up the valley toward his shack and tepee on the hillside.

It was far past noon when the last of the older Omahas left the scene of the dance.

The greater number of the white men who had witnessed the last thunder dance of the Omahas went homeward much pleased. The "show" had turned out quite funny, indeed. "Ha! ha! ha! did you see how surprised the old cuggy looked? Ha! ha! ha!"

Life being necessarily selfish, reasons from its own standpoint.

But the minister rode slowly toward the Mission; there was no laughter in his heart. He was saying to himself: "If the whole fabric of my belief were suddenly wrenched from me, what then?" Even that question was born of a sort of selfishness, but it brought pity.

So, in the cool of the evening, the minister mounted his horse and rode to the home of Mah−ho−wari, which was a shack in the winter and a tepee in the summer. Dismounting, he threw the bridle−rein upon the ground and raised the door flap of the tepee. Mah−ho−wari sat cross−legged upon the ground, staring steadily before him.

"How!" said the minister.

The old Indian was silent. There was no expression of grief or anger or despair upon his face. He sat like a bronze statue. But the irregularity of his breathing showed where the pain lay. An Indian suffers in his breast. His face is

a mask.

The minister sat down in front of the silent old man, and after the immemorial manner of ministers, talked of a better world, of a pitying Christ and of God, the Great Father. For the first time, the Indian raised his face and spoke briefly in English:

"God! He dead, guess!"

Then he was silent for some time. Suddenly his eyes lit up with a light that was not the light of age. The heart of his youth had awakened. The old memories came back, and he spoke fluently in his own tongue.

"These times are not like the old times. The young men have caught the wisdom of the white man. Nothing is sure. It is not good. I cannot understand. Everything is young and new. All old things are dead.

"I can remember how my father said to me one day when I was yet young and all things lay new before me: 'Let my son go to a high hill and dream a great dream.' And I went up in the evening and cried out to Wakunda, and I slept and dreamed. I saw a great cloud sweeping up from under the earth, and it was terrible with lightning and loud thunder. Then it passed over me and rumbled down the sky and disappeared. And when I awoke and told my people of my dream, they rejoiced much and said: "Great things are in store for this youth. We shall call him the passing cloud, and he shall be a thunder man, keen and quick of thought with the keenness and quickness of the lightning, and his name shall be loud like the thunder."

And I grew and believed in these sayings, and I was strong. But now I can see the meaning of the dream a great light and a great noise and a passing."

The old man sighed and the light passed out of his eyes. Then he looked into the face of the minister, and said, speaking again in English:

"You white medicine man; you pray?"

The minister nodded. Mah−ho−wari sighed and said mournfully:

"White God dead, too, guess."