

The Look in the Face

John G. Neihardt

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"It will make me glad to tell you about a man whom I wished to kill," said Half-a-Day, puffing at his pipe, and handing it to me, "for we have looked upon each other through pipe-smoke and eaten meat out of the same kettle. We are brothers, though our faces are not the same."

We sat beside the lodge-fire, my brown friend and I. He had the keen, hawk face, and his eyes stared through the flame down a trail I could not see.

"Many winters and summers ago I was young. I am slow now, and I am looking much to the ground when I walk; for," he continued, "I am going there soon. I can see the face of Paezha, the Flower, the one daughter of Douba Mona, for my eyes have grown young a little while to-night. Paezha was not so big as the other squaws, and could never be so big, because she was not made for building teepees and carrying wood and water. She was small and good to look upon, like some of your white sisters. And there was no face in all the village of my people like hers. Her feet touched the ground like a little wind from the south, they fell so lightly; her body bent easily like a willow. I think her eyes were like stars!"

I smiled, because the simile has become so trite among us white lovers. But Half-a-Day saw me not; he looked down the long trail that leads back to youth, the trail no feet can ever follow twice.

"And I looked upon her face," continued Half-a-Day, "until I could see nothing else -- not the sunup nor the sundown nor the moon and stars. Her face became a medicine face to me; because I was young and she was good to see. Also, I was a poor young man. My father had few ponies, and her father had as many as one could see with a big look, hand at brow. But I was strong and proud; and in the long nights I dreamed of Paezha, till one day I said:

"I will have her, and I will fight all the braves in all the villages before I will give her up. Then afterward, I will get many ponies."

"So one evening, when the meat boiled over the fires, I went down to the big spring in the valley, and hid in the grass; for Paezha brought cold water to her father in the evenings, carrying it in a little kettle smaller than your head-cover, for she was not big. I lay waiting. I could not hear the running of the spring water nor the wind in the willows, because my heart sang so loud.

"I heard a step -- and it was Paezha. She leaned over the spring and looked down; and there were then two Paezhas, so my wish for her was doubled, having the strength of two wishes. I arose from the grass. She looked upon me, and fear came into her face, for there was that in my face which wished to conquer, and I was very strong. Like the antelope she leaped and ran with wind-feet down the valley. I was breathless when I caught her and lifted her with an arm too strong; for I hurt her, and she cried."

Half-a-Day reached toward me for the pipe. His eyes were masterful, with the world-old spirit of the conquering male in them.

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"Then, as I held her, I looked upon her face, and saw that which I had never seen before — a look in the face that was sad and weak and frightened, begging for pity. Only it was not all that; it was shining like the sun through a cloud; and it was stronger than I, for I became weak and could not hold her. A little while she looked with big eyes upon me; and I saw then what makes the squaws break their backs carrying wood and water and papooses; also, what makes men do big deeds that are not selfish. Then she ran from me, and I fell upon my face and cried like a baby at the back of a squaw."

Half-a-Day puffed hard at his pipe; then, sighing, handed it back to me.

"Have you seen that look in the face, white brother?" he said, staring with eyes that mastered me.

"I am young," I answered.

"But when you see that look, it will make you old," he went on, "for when I arose and went back to the village, I was old, and nothing was the same. From that time I could look the biggest brave in the eyes, for I was a man; I had seen the look.

"It was in the time when the sunflowers die — the time for the hunting of bison. So the whole tribe made ready for the hunt. One morning we rode out, and it was good to see the braves and the ponies and the squaws walking behind one another out of the village on the bison trail. And we were so many that the foremost were lost in the hills when the last left the village. We all sang; and the ponies neighed at the lonesome lodges, for they were leaving home.

"Many days we traveled toward the place of evening, and there was song in me, even when I did not sing; for always I was near Paezha, who rode in a blanket slung on a pole between two ponies, for she was the daughter of Douba Mona, who was not a poor man. And I spoke gentle words to her, and she smiled — because she had seen my weakness at the big spring. Also I picked flowers for her, and she took them. But one day Black Dog rode on the other side of Paezha and spoke soft words. And a strange look was on the face of Paezha; but not the look I had seen in the valley of the big spring. So I drove away the sudden bitterness of my heart, and spoke good words to Black Dog. But he was sullen; also he was better to look upon than I. I can say this now, for I have felt the winds of many winters.

"Many sleeps we rode toward the place of evening. When we started, the moon was thin and small and bent like a child's bow, and it hung above the sunset. As we traveled, it grew bigger and bigger, ever farther toward the place of morning, until at last it came forth no more, but slept in its black lodge after its long, steep trail. But we did not rest, though our trail was long and hard. And all the while we strained our eyes from many hilltops, but saw no bison. Scarcer and scarcer was the food; for the summer had been a summer of fighting, and we had conquered and feasted much, hunted little.

"So it happened that we who were still strong took less meat, that the weaker might live until we found the bison. And all the while the strength of Paezha's face grew upon me, so that I divided my meat with her. It made me sing to see her eat. One day she said to me:

"Why do you sing, Half-a-Day, when all the people are sad?"

"I sing because I am empty!" I said.

"Black Dog, who rode upon the other side, he did not sing. So she said:

"Why do you not sing, Black Dog? Is it because we do not find the bison?"

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"I do not sing because I am empty,' he said.

"All day I was afraid that Paezha had judged between us, seeing me so light of thought and deed. That evening, when we stopped for the night, there was not enough meat left to keep us five sleeps longer. The squaws did not sing as they pitched the teepees. They were empty; the braves were empty, and the papooses whined like little baby coyotes at their mothers' backs. No one spoke. The fires boomed up and made the hills sound as with the bellowing of bulls; and the sound mocked us. The dark came down; we sat about the fires, but we did not speak. We groaned; for we were empty and we would not eat until we had slept again. Once every sleep we ate, and we had eaten.

"That night the wise old men gathered together in the teepee of the chiefs and sang medicine songs that our god, Wakanda, might see our suffering and send us the bison. I heard the songs and I felt a great strength grow up out of my emptiness. Then I said:

"I will go to the fathers, and they will send me in search of the bison; and I will find the bison for Paezha, so that she may not starve.'

"I had forgotten myself and my people; I knew only Paezha. For that day I had heard her moan, having nothing more to give. So I went to the big teepee. I stood among the fathers, and lifted a strong voice in spite of my emptiness:

"Give me a swift pony and a little meat,' I said, 'and I will find the bison!'

"And the old men looked upon me, sighing. But Douba Mona, Paezha's father, being one of the wise men, said:

"I see a light in his eye, and hear a strength in his voice. Give him the swift pony and the little meat. If he finds the bison, then he shall have Paezha, for well I see that something is between them. Also, he shall have many ponies.'

"And these words made me full, as if I had sat at a feast.

II

"The next morning," Half-a-Day went on, "I took the swift pony and the little meat, and galloped toward the evening. The people did not take the trail, because toil makes hunger. Two sleeps I rode, singing songs and dreaming dreams of Paezha. And on the evening of the third sunlight, I stopped upon a hill. I was sick and weak, because my emptiness had come back, and I had not yet found the bison. I fell upon my face and moaned, and my emptiness sent me to sleep.

"When I awoke, some one sat beside me; and it was Black Dog. He breathed soft words.

"I have come to watch over Half-a-Day,' he said, 'because I am stronger and a bigger man.'

"I spoke not a word, but I felt my heart warm toward Black Dog, for my dreams of Paezha made me kind.

"Well I know,' he said — and his voice was soft as a woman's — 'well I know what Half-a-Day dreams about. And I have come to watch over him that his dream may come true.'

"Then, being a young man and full of kindness, I told Black Dog of the look I had seen in the face of Paezha. And he bit his lips, and there was a sound in his throat that was not pleasant. I fell to sleep, wondering much.

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"When I awoke, the ponies were gone, the meat was gone, Black Dog was gone. I grew strong as a bear. I shrieked into the stillness. I shook my fists at the sun. I cursed Black Dog!

"I stumbled on over the hills and valleys, shouting, singing angry songs, hurling big words of little meaning into the yellow day.

"Before night came, I found the body of a dead wolf, and I fell upon it like a hungry crow. I tore its flesh with my teeth. I called it Black Dog. It smelled bad. I found a little stream — it was almost lost in the mud — and I drank much. I slept and dreamed of Paezha; I saw her thin and weak; she was starving. I awoke — and it was day. I found the dead wolf again and ate. Then I was stronger, and I went on into the empty yellow prairie.

"Toward evening I heard a thundering, yet saw no cloud. It was the dry time. Still it thundered — yet no cloud. I ran to the top of a hill and gazed.

"Bison! Bison! The prairie was full of bison, and they were feeding slowly toward the camp of my people.

"I turned, I ran! I did not make a sound; I needed all my strength for running. I ran, ran, ran! I fell; I got up; I fell. Night came; I walked. Morning came; still I walked. Night came; I stumbled. And in the morning I was creeping. I did not know when I reached the camp of my people. I remember only a dim shouting and a sudden moving of the tribe. And then — after many bad dreams — I was awake again, and the people were feasting. They had found the bison.

"Then, when we were on the home trail, I learned of the treachery of Black Dog. He had told the people that he had found Half-a-Day dead on the prairie, and that he was too weak to bring me back. All the people believed for a time; and Black Dog spoke soft words to Paezha, brave words to Douba Mona, till I was almost forgotten. But now I was a great man among my people, and Black Dog could not raise his head, because hate was in the people's eyes for him. And in the time of the first frosts we reached our village and Paezha became my squaw. Also, I got the ponies."

Here Half-a-Day paused to fill his pipe.

"It is a good story, Half-a-Day," I said.

Half-a-Day lit his pipe, stared long into the glow of the embers, for the fire had fallen, and sighed.

"I have not spoken yet," he said. "One day in the time of the first snows, Paezha lay dead in my lodge, and my breast ached. Black Dog had killed her at the spring. He did not wish that I should have her. At the same place he killed her where I had first seen the look. I sat beside her two sleeps and cried like a child; and my friends came to me and spoke bitter words into my ear.

"'Kill Black Dog,' they said.

"'Bring him to me,' I answered, 'and I will kill him, for my legs will not carry me'; but the fathers of the council would not have it so.

"When they had buried her on the hill above the village, I awoke as from a long sleep, and I was full of hate. They kept me in my lodge. They would not let me kill him. I wished to kill! I wished to tear him with my teeth as I had torn the stinking wolf! I wished to kill!"

Half-a-Day had arisen to his feet, his fists clenched, his eyes shining with a cold light. He made a tragic figure in the dull, blue glow of the embers.

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"Come, Half-a-Day," I said, "it is long past, and now it is only a story."

"It is more than a story!" he cried. "I lived it! I wished to kill!"

He sat down again, and a softer light came into his eyes.

"And the time came," he continued with a weary voice, "when Black Dog should be cast forth from the tribe, according to the ancient custom of my people. I said: 'I will follow Black Dog, and I will see him die.'"

"He was cast forth in the night, and I followed.

III

"It was very cold. The snow whined under my feet like a sick wolf, and I followed in the night. But Black Dog did not know I followed.

"I was ever near him like a shadow. I did not sleep; I watched Black Dog. I meant to see him die. I was afraid to sleep, lest he should die and I not see him. In his first sleep I crept upon him. I stole his meat, I stole his weapons; now he would die, and I would be there to see. I would be there to laugh! I would be there to sing! In the cold pale morning I lay huddled in a clump of sage, and I saw him get up, look for his meat and weapons, and stagger away into the lonesome places of the snow. And I sang a low song to myself. The time would come when I would see Black Dog die!

"I did not feel the cold. I was never weary. I was never sleepy. In the evenings I was ever near enough to hear him groan when he wrapped himself in his blankets. Often I crept up to him in his sleep and looked upon his face in the light of the stars; and I saw my time coming, for his face was thinner, and he was not so good to see as in the time when the sunflowers died. I could have killed him, but then he could not have heard me sing; he could not have heard me laugh. So I waited and followed and watched. I ate my meat raw, for I did not wish to let Black Dog see my fire. In the mornings I saw him look upon my footprints with wonder; but he could not know my footprints. Also I watched to see that he found nothing to eat; and he found nothing.

"One day I lay upon the summit of a hill and saw him totter and fall in the valley. Then I could be quiet no longer. I raised my voice; I shouted.

"Fall, Black Dog! Even so Half-a-Day fell with weakness when Black Dog stole his meat and his pony! Do you remember?"

"And I saw Black Dog get up and stare about, for I was hidden. Then his voice came up to me over the snow. It was a thin voice:

"I know you, Half-a-Day; come and kill me!"

"Half-a-Day never kills sick men nor squaws!" I cried, and then I laughed -- a cold, a bitter laugh.

"Black Dog shook his fists at the four corners of the sky and stumbled off into the hills. I followed. And now my time was very near, for Black Dog felt my nearness, and he knew that he would die and I would see him.

"One evening my time came. Black Dog was in the valley by a frozen stream, and he fell upon his face, sending forth a thin cry as he fell -- a cry thin and ice-like. He did not get up; he lay very still. I ran down to where he lay -- and I laughed, I laughed, I laughed! I heard him groan. I rolled him over on his back and looked upon his face. I wish I had not looked upon his face! He opened his eyes, and they were very dim and sunken. His face was

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sharp. I sat down beside him. I said:

"Now die, and I will sing for you!"

"Then his face changed. It became a squaw's face — and it had the look! A look that was sad and weak and frightened, begging for pity! And it seemed to me that it was not the face of Black Dog any more. It had the look! I had seen it in the face of Paezha by the big spring.

"Now, since I have many winters behind me, I wonder if it was not a coward's face; but then it was not so. I grew soft. There was a great springtime in me. I wrapped my blankets about him. I gave him meat. He stared at me, and ate like a wolf. I spoke soft words. I made a fire from the brush that was by the frozen stream. All night I watched him, and in the morning I said:

"Take my bow and arrows, Black Dog. I wish to die. Go on and live.' For my wish to kill had been my life, and now I had lost the wish to kill. I wished to die. And he said no word, only his eyes were changed.

"I staggered away on the back trail. I had no meat. I had no blankets. I had no weapons. I meant to die. But, you see, I did not die. When I lay down at night, worn out, half frozen, some one wrapped blankets about me and built a fire. In the morning I found food beside me. And so it was for many sleeps, until at last I came to the village of my people, broken, caring for nothing. I was thin, my face was sharp, my eyes were sunken, my step was very short. The people looked upon me with wonder, saying:

"Half-a-Day has come back from killing Black Dog!"

"But the truth was different. Only my wish to kill had died."

When Half-a-Day had finished, he stared long into the fire without speaking.

"Do you think Black Dog was all a coward?" I said at length. "Perhaps he only loved too much."

"I do not know," said Half-a-Day in a low voice. "I only know sometimes I wish I had not looked upon his face."

EDITOR'S NOTE — In connection with this story of the Omaha Indians, it may be worth while to quote from a letter written by Dr. Susan La Flesche Picotte, who is a daughter of Estamaza (Iron-Eye), the last chief of the Omahas.

"As a race," Mrs. Picotte says, "we have suffered many things of many writers — writers who, with only a superficial knowledge of the Indian character, may have given to the public something 'readable,' but not true to Indian nature. Mr. Neihardt's delineation is accurate and admirable, for not only has he drawn his information from authentic Indian sources, but his sympathetic in-sight into the mysticism and spiritual nature of the race gives him a true understanding of Indian character.

"Cooper's Indian and Remington's Indian are admirable for having rendered those authors' work 'distinctive,' but their sameness becomes tiresome. As an Indian, I feel a little resentful that they should stand as representative types of all my people, when there is so much that is beau-tiful, noble, and dignified in the Indian of the past that could be given to the world instead."