The Singing of the Frogs

John G. Neihardt

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WABISGAHA loved the tawny stretches of the prairie smiling like a rugged, honest face under the kiss of the sunlight; he loved the storm that frowned and shouted like an angry chief; he loved the south−wind and the scent of the spring, yet the love of woman he knew not, for his heart was given to his horse, Ingla Hota, which means Laughing Thunder.

Why should he have a squaw? Did not Laughing Thunder toss his mane and neigh when he heard the soft steps of his master? Was not Laughing Thunder his companion and his helpmeet? Ah, no, Wabisgaha would have no squaw.

And furthermore, his love for Laughing Thunder was not sentiment; it was religion. Many and weird were the tales that the wise old men told about the evening fires concerning the horse of Wabisgaha. It was said in a subdued voice, lest that some demon face should peer into the circle of the fire from the darkness, that Laughing Thunder contained an evil spirit; that Wabisgaha was secretly a great medicine man, who had learned the terrible words that tame the spirits of the thunder, and had made the black Power of the storm come down and be his horse. Yes, and there was one who had watched Laughing Thunder graze all day upon the hills and never a blade was nipped; but where the breath of his nostrils passed, the grass was seared as with lightning. Another had noticed how Laughing Thunder wasted away when the storms were few, like sunflowers pining for the rain; and how one night when the lightning flashed and the thunder howled, he had seen a burning horse leap from the top of a hill and gallop through the clouds, neighing half like the laugh of a man, half like the shout of the thunder.

"Some day Wabisgaha will ride to the land of the spirits," they would all agree, gazing wide−eyed at each other while the last blue flame struggled in the embers. Then they would shrug their shoulders as though the touch of an invisible hand chilled them; shaking their heads by which to say, "Ugh! there are many strange things."

It was the month of the sunflower. Wabisgaha one night, half asleep in his tepee, was aroused by a strange sound among the horses, which were left to graze upon the hills near the village. Creeping out of his tepee into the open air, he could hear nothing but the slumberous moan of the distant thunder, for the southeast was black and glaring by fits with a coming storm. Then there burst forth upon the dull sultry air of the night a shrill, clear neigh and the sound of many hurrying hoofs. That neigh! Ah, it was the neigh of Laughing Thunder. It came again, but this time dimmer, and the gallop of hoofs grew softer as with distance.

Wabisgaha rushed out into the night crying, "Ingla Hota, Ingla Hota." But for answer the storm howled on the hills. By the glare of the lightning he found the trail of the fleeing hoofs. He would take the trail and find his horse. "Ingla Hota, Ingla Hota," he cried. The big rain drops drummed upon the hills. It seemed to him that the thunder cried back, and ended with a sound like the neigh of a mighty steed. So all night he followed the trail of the hoofs southward, mingling his cries with the cries of the wind and the thunder; and when the storm lulled and the day dawned, he climbed to the top of a hill and scanned the drenched prairies, but no horse! Only the pathless brown sea of grass glinting in the sun; a maddening monotony, save for the occasional gulch like a battle−scar on the face of a warrior. No sound except the caw of a distant crow and the monotone of silence.

With a grunt of despair he again took up the trail. He noted that the trail was narrow and well beaten. Horses of themselves do not travel single file. Then he knew that he was following a party of warriors. In his haste he had not taken his bow, and his feet were bare to the cactus and prickly pear; yet all day long he kept upon the trail, and when night came he slept upon it. Ah, no, he would not lose Laughing Thunder. Another night passed, and when the sun of the next day was half way down from the zenith, Wabisgaha, standing upon a hill, gazed into the sandy valley of the broad and shallow stream, and there in the wooded bottoms were the jumbled mud lodges of the Pawnee village.

From time unknown the Pawnees and Omahas were friends; yet as Wabisgaha gazed down upon the village he feared that the ancient friendship had been broken. But he was very weary, and the thought of losing Laughing

Thunder was like a lash of buckskin behind him. So he passed down into the valley. A band of shouting Pawnees in war paint came out to meet the lone stranger. Several of the party seized upon him, binding his arms behind him with thongs of rawhide, while the others danced deliriously about, shouting and waving their weapons above their heads. And the captive, weary and unarmed, without resistance was led in among the lodges.

There has ever been a something appealingly majestic about the defiance of an Indian; and as Wabisgaha strode beside his captors, naked but for the buck−skin breech−clout, decorated with colored beads, his broad chest brown as of beaten copper; the great muscles expanding in impotent anger; the laboring of the lungs; the flash of the black eye from beneath the heavy brow; the long wiry hair tossing on his bare shoulders; these would have suggested to an esthetic imagination the incarnate spirit of the untamed prairies.

As he passed between the rows of shouting Pawnees, he failed to notice among a bunch of squaws an Indian girl who stared at him, wide−mouthed with interest and wonder. She was clad more brilliantly than her companions, and the blue spot upon her forehead at once marked her as a maiden of distinction. It was Umba (Sunlight), the daughter of the stern warchief of the Pawnees, Pedavashaloo.

As the captive and the captors hurried on to the lodge of the big chief, Umba gazed longingly after them with that soft light in her eye which is not star−light nor sunshine, but has something of the gentle tenderness of the one and the potent glory of the other. A woman is a woman, though her face be angular and swarthy, and the love of a daughter of the prairie takes unto itself an element of boundlessness like the plain and of fury like the winds that sweep.

Umba was moved by the defiant attitude of the captive, for womankind loves bravery. She was charmed by the magnificent brown limbs, the powerful chest, the fierce eye.

Wabisgaha was taken before Pedavashaloo, who stood at the door of his lodge. The bold eye of the captive met the stern glance of the chief, and for a while both were silent. Then the chief spoke:

"Why do you come among my people?"

The captive threw back his head, and in a fierce guttural, said:

"My people and your people have been friends; your people stole Wabisgaha's horse; give him back that Wabisgaha may return in peace to his village."

The eye of the chief flashed with sudden anger.

"My people do not steal!" he thundered. "My people make war; you are a captive; to−morrow you shall die!"

That night the women who slept in the lodge of Umba were often awakened by her moaning. She was thinking of Wabisgaha. But he, lying bound and guarded, did not moan; he was thinking of his horse. Now he was going to the land of the spirits. How lonely he would be without Laughing Thunder. Often through the night he prayed to Wakunda that his horse might be killed and go with him. When the sky paled with the early morning he slept and dreamed. He stood upon a high hill and the clouds were about him. The feverish red sun was sinking below him. Suddenly the clouds glowed as when a prairie fire roars and crackles through the night, and then there burst upon his ear a mighty neigh, half laugh, half thunder, and a burning steed galloped through the parting mist toward him. He awoke, and the Dawn looked in at the door! It was a good omen; he would not be afraid to die. When the sun was scarcely an arrow length above the hills he was led out from among the lodges into the open valley.

The whole village trooped behind him, shouting and mad with expectation, for it was great fun to behold a captive dragged at the heels of a horse. The rabble grew thicker as he advanced. A band of shrieking squaws pushed their way to him and spit in his face. Many times he was dragged backward by his long hair onto the sand by the frenzied warriors. All this was borne with a dogged patience by the captive, for was he not going to the land of the spirits?

It was an ancient custom among the Pawnees that if a captive should receive a morsel of meat from one of the tribe he was to be spared, as thus being favored by the Great Spirit.

Suddenly the shouting ceased, and the tall imperious form of Pedavashaloo was seen pushing a way through the rabble. Behind him a young squaw followed, carrying a morsel of meat in her hand. Rushing up to the surprised captive, she put the meat to his mouth. Wabisgaha seized and ate the meat greedily, and for the first and last time looked with kindness into the appealing eyes of Umba.

Then a great change came over the multitude. The warriors, but a moment before thirsting for the blood of the captive, now fell back in awe as though the hand of Umba had been the visible hand of the Great Spirit.

Dumb with amazement Wabisgaha stared about him, until Pedavashaloo motioned him to follow; and in silence they took their way to the big chief's lodge. After they had sat down, the chief took two long pipes, and lighting both, handed one to Wabisgaha. Silently they smoked the pipe of peace.

After a while Pedavashaloo spoke, bluntly, after the manner of the prairie: "Umba weeps for Wabisgaha. Come back in the month when the frogs sing (April) and take her for your squaw!"

Then Wabisgaha said: "I will come back in the month when the frogs sing and take her for my squaw. Give me my horse that I may go back to my people."

"Pedavashaloo will feed the horse with his own hand until Wabisgaha comes," the chief answered.

The next morning a band of Pawnees rode out of the village, and among them rode Wabisgaha; but he was not riding Laughing Thunder.

Until noon the band attended him across the prairies; then they turned backward, and alone Wabisgaha rode mournfully northward toward the village of his people.

In the absence of Wabisgaha strange rumors had grown among his tribe concerning him and his horse. The wise old men whispered strange things about the demon horse and its rider. Ah, yes, Wabisgaha had at last ridden to the land of the Thunder Spirits. And the listening youths crept into their blankets very closely at night, dreaming weird dreams.

So when Wabisgaha rode his jaded pony sullenly over the brown brow of the hill and entered the village his people had no cry of welcome for his ears; but slunk away in fear and awe. For had he not been to the land of the thunder spirits? Day by day Wabisgaha sat alone in his lodge, brooding bitterly over the loss of his horse. And the winter swept down from the north and howled across the prairies. Far southward in the village of the Pawnees Umba sat in her lodge and gazed long hours into the crackling fire. There was no winter in her dreaming. She was thinking of the time when the frogs sing, for then she would be the squaw of Wabisgaha.

Many days passed, but Wabisgaha did not leave his lodge, and his people began to wonder, for no one knew in what manner he procured wood for his fire. Then it was rumored about that the thunder spirits dwelt with him in his lodge. Yes, for one whose curiosity led him one night to creep up to the strange man's door had heard him muttering busily with his eyes upon the fire. Yet he was alone.

So it happened one night in the stormy month when the lone goose flies (February) that he was summoned before the seven chiefs of the council. In their great tepee they sat, cross−legged, about the fire. Wabisgaha stood before them, and as they gazed upon his face, they shuddered with fear, for it was the face of a sick man's dream, and the eyes were cold but glowing, for he had mourned much and eaten little.

Then one of the chiefs spoke as one who speaks to a spectre:

"Where did Wabisgaha go in the month of the sunflowers?" (August).

Then Wabisgaha's silence passed, for he could speak of Laughing Thunder. He told them how the Pawnees had stolen his horse; how he had followed the trail to their village; how they would have slain him but for the gift of a morsel of meat. He spoke with all the eloquence of a wronged man and with all the pathos of a simple heart that is wounded. But the seven chiefs were silent. They feared him and doubted his story. After talking together for some time, they again spoke to him:

"If Wabisgaha has been wronged, we will give him revenge. He shall lead a war party against the Pawnees, but he must not return alive!"

So Wabisgaha withdrew to his lodge. All night he brooded by his fire. Why should he have a squaw? He would lead a war party against the Pawnees. He would have revenge for the stealing of Laughing Thunder. A great, wild happiness came over him; after that he went about the village with a glad heart and his people ceased to fear him.

One morning, in the time when the frogs sing, the war party started southward, and Wabisgaha rode at their head. All day their ponies scurried across the green hills. All night they rode, and long before the east was gray they halted upon the hill that overlooked the valley of the broad and shallow stream where the Pawnee village nestled.

At the time when the flight of an arrow could be discerned, Wabisgaha rode in front of his band, and, dismounting, he raised his eyes to the gray heavens and uttered his last prayer to Wakunda. Then he seized a handful of dust and tossed it above his head. Thus a brave ever does before going to certain death. Then he mounted his pony, and, with a terrible yell, the war party swooped down the hill into the sleeping village. The

Pawnees could make but little resistance, and those who were not slain fled in terror, followed by the frenzied Omahas. But Wabisgaha did not ride in pursuit. His knife was red with revenge, and now he would die!

Some distance from him he beheld the tall form of Pedavashaloo standing before his lodge in defiance. His arms and breast were besmeared with the blood of the Omahas, who lay in a semi−circle about him. His long, sinewy arms were corded with the stress of fight, and his hand clasped the terrible hunting knife.

Wabisgaha cast away his bow and quiver of arrows, and dismounting, he took his knife in his hand, and, raising his arms to the skies, he uttered a low wail four times. Then he rushed at the defiant chief. There was none to see the struggle, for the clamor of the fight came dimly from far down the valley, and the muffled wail of the women was heard from the lodges. Each knife found a bare, brown breast, and side by side the enemies lay, choking, until their spirits passed into the happy land where the tribes are at peace.

That night, amid the silence of the stricken village, Umba crept from among the terrified women, and, hurrying to where Laughing Thunder was staked by the lodge of her father, she led the horse to where the body of Wabisgaha lay among her dead kinsmen. With great effort she placed the body across the horse's back, and, taking a bow and arrow from one of the dead warriors, she mounted behind the body and rode off into the still, clear night of the prairies.

After riding many hours, she dismounted in a valley and placed the body on the ground. Then fitting the arrow to the string of the bow, she sent it into the heart of Laughing Thunder. Now Wabisgaha would find his horse in the land of the spirits. Then Umba sat beside the bodies and moaned.

The night passed and the sun looked over the green hills into the valley and found Umba watching by the bodies. All that day she waited, singing softly a wild Indian song to the spirit of Wabisgaha. And the crows came out of the horizon in a low trailing cloud, cawing in anticipation of their meal. Umba kept them away by shaking her robe above her head and singing louder. Then the crows, with a dismal rustle of wings, would soar above the three, cawing clamorously. The evening came and the frogs sang in the valley. Yes, it was the time of the singing of the frogs. This was the time when she should have become the squaw of Wabisgaha. Plaintively she moaned at the thought, gazing upon the pinched face beside her. The night fell, and Umba was very faint with hunger and watching. So she laid her head upon the breast of Wabisgaha. Maybe she would wake and be with him in the land of the spirits.

The night passed, and when the sun looked into the valley, Umba was lying motionless where she had lain down to sleep.

The crows swooped down, chattering; they were not frightened away.

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Months afterward a hunting party of Omahas, finding upon the prairie three skeletons, one of a squaw, one of a buck, and one of a horse, returned to the tribe and told a story at the evening fires.

But they could not know how Wabisgaha died for his horse and Umba died for Wabisgaha.