

The Fading of Shadow Flower

John G. Neihardt

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SHE was only a timid little Omaha maiden with a pair of pensive eyes, dark like the thunder clouds, and like them fraught with a potential fire that was ever about to spend its fury in the weakness of tears. She passed her childhood hours beside the singing streams and in the lonesome places where the silence lingered. The sunrise and the sunset found her where the wild flowers clustered, or where the noises of the nesting birds disturbed the stillness of the thickets. For hers was a timorous soul, and the dumb kindness of the green things was so sweet to her.

So as she grew in this wise toward that mysterious time when the immaturity of the girl bursts into the magic of the woman, her people said: "She talks with the things that talk not; she plays with the wind that sleeps and moans in the shadowy place." And that is why they named her Shadow Flower. In the long mysterious nights of the winter, Shadow Flower wept with fear at the mournful cry of the coyotes, and often through the droning days of the summer did the harsh warning of the startled rattlesnake send her trembling in terror to her mother's breast. Yet, huddled close to the group about the evening fires, she loved to listen to the warriors' tales of the strong arm and the fierce heart; and her eyes glowed with an unwonted light as her kinsmen recounted the wild swoop of the ambushed foe or the silent pursuit swift and relentless.

All the glowing ideals of manly prowess that her maiden heart had conjured were centered in the person of the fearless brave, Big Axe: for had he not the eagle glance that went to the heart of an enemy like an arrow? Was his not the shaggy head of the buffalo bull that strikes with fear the boldest hunter? The breadth of his sinewy breast was like a whirlwind when the battle cry awakened in his throat. There was no arm in all the circled tepees that could hurl a tomahawk so straight and far; and none that could heave above the anger of the battle a war club more ponderous.

"Ah," she would say to herself, while wandering alone with her musings, "Big Axe is so great a man!"

When a band of warriors rode out of the village bent upon some petty conquest somewhere beyond the blue hills that undulated the far horizon with their summits, Shadow Flower was very lonely and she would stand for long hours upon some larger hills, scanning the dim skyline for the returning warriors; for where the battle was, there was Big Axe. And when at last she would catch sight of the returning band, shouting with the great joy of a battle won, O how proudly she stared, and with what a light in her eyes, at her graceful warrior astride his swift pony; how anxiously would she search the headdress of her brave for the fresh eagle feather that should speak of some late and daring deed done by the strong arm: her strong arm!

Yet her timorous little soul alone knew of the great overflowing passion that she treasured for Big Axe; unless, perhaps, the birds and the green things understood her, for hers was a passion that little words could not carry.

Thus did the frail flower of the Shadow long for the golden kisses of the Sun!

There was war between the Omaha and Ponca tribes. So it happened one morning in the time when the deer tear the earth with their horns (September) that Shadow Flower, hunting late blossoms upon the sere hills where the young Dawn danced, heard below her the impatient stamp of ponies and beheld the mounting of braves, for Big Axe was leading a party of a hundred warriors against the enemy. The purple spikes of the iron weed and the yellow plumes of the golden rod dropped from her fingers as she gazed upon the sight below her. What a sight! It was as the marshalling of the incarnate Winds from the circle of the heavens! Out of the dust cloud that arose from the dry earth where four hundred nervous hoofs danced fretting with impatience beneath the restraining throng, she caught the dazzle of the sleek and vari-colored hides of the ponies; some white with the brilliance of the summer sun when it glares upon the false lakes of alkali; some spotted and wiry as the wild cat; some tawny as the mountain lion; some black like the midnight when the storm clouds fly!

Their gaunt flanks were heaving with the glory of speed and power. Their nostrils were distant with the influx

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of prairie winds that knew no restraining hand save that of the great invisible Master. They reared, snorting, as if about to plunge into the air in a wild heat down the winds! Their neighing was the shout of the tempest in the rocks; and their gusty manes were a cloud that tatters in the storm! And amid this melee of dust and noise and dazzle trembled the gaudy headdresses of the warriors, bright with the painted wing feathers of the eagle and the hawk.

Now a shout drowns the neighing and the snorting. A hundred braves leap to the backs of the plunging ponies. The dust cloud thickens and sweeps down the valley like a whirlwind! A far glint of brandished weapons; a dying shout. The band swoops about the base of a hill. Then the sultry day drones and drowns on the prairie. The grasshopper breaks the slumber of the stillness with his snapping noise; a lone hawk skirts the ground with slow circling flight. But Shadow Flower stands and stares beneath a shading hand into the brilliance where the warriors vanished. Her ears hear not the snarl and hum of the drowsy bugs, nor the shrill chatter of the gopher as it rears its striped body from the grass, and peers about. She sees not the circling hawk, and scarce does the glint of the yellow grass hurt her eyes. For her ears are filled with the shout that has died, and in her eyes a sinewy, masterful brave urges a black pony down the valley.

After a while her hand dropped from her brow, and catching sight of the wheeling hawk, she cried: "O you who are so keen of eye, can you not see into the heart of Muzape Tunga (Big Axe)? O you who are so keen of thought, tell me, does he think of Pazha Hu?" (Shadow Flower.)

But the hawk circled far away and the day droned on.

Among the hills, hidden from one who looked and saw not, the war party rode on with the noses of its ponies to that portion of the sky from which the red sun of summer springs, for in that direction lay the village of the Poncas, perched upon the yellow bluffs of the great muddy river.

On the evening of the second day the air grew soft with the scent of flowing waters, and the Omahas, checking their ponies upon the brow of a hill, beheld to their right the swirling stream red with the last light of the day, and before them, across a deep hollow, the village of the Poncas sitting upon the summit of a bluff.

But while their eyes wandered over the misty stretches of the river a wild shout startled the calm of the scene, while from the village on the opposite summit a line of mounted warriors issued, taking the precipitous hillside at a swift gallop.

The sudden shout and the beat of flying hoofs hurled the weary ponies of the Omahas back upon their haunches. Yet scarcely had the echoes of the shout cried their last from the distant bluffs, when a hundred Omaha bowstrings twanged and a hundred arrows shrieked their shrill death song in the quiet air! A second and a third shriek of arrows, and the rushing Poncas were thrown into confusion; those in the rear being thrown by the floundering bodies of the wounded ponies in the front, the fury of their momentum hurling them pell mell into the valley below. Then the Omahas swept down into the valley, as the eagle sweeps, with the terrible *ugthaa* (a battle cry) upon their lips, and the remaining Poncas fled up the steep hillside toward their village.

The village of the Poncas, in addition to its strong position, was further fortified by stockades, constructed of saplings driven into the ground with their tops sharpened. The fugitives having gained the protection of this barrier, were safe from further pursuit; and emboldened by this reassurance they hurled such a flight of arrows into the enraged Omahas that the latter were obliged to withdraw beyond arrow flight, contenting themselves with taunting their besieged foes by displaying the dripping scalps of the fallen with vaunting shouts.

Now the influence of the fading evening cooled the anger and hushed the shouting. From the height, whither the assaulting band withdrew to camp, one could hurl the triumphant gaze unnumbered bowshots westward, athwart the brown hills that seemed to have been stricken motionless in liquid turbulence by the enchantment of the sunset, marvelous with the pomp of streamers, violet, purple, sanguine, saffron, dun!

Far up the river the blue haze of the sky-fringed woodland blended into the purple shadow beneath the contrasting yellow of the bluffs, that looked down into the slow smooth waters upon their scarred and wrinkled images, crowned with golden crowns by the last scant sunlight! The cottonwoods placed their long shadows like soothing fingers upon the muddy madness of the central stream. The Night awakened in the East and stretched his long black arms into the West, and the glory vanished. The distant woodland and the bluffs grew into black indistinguishable masses. The river became a faint film above a lower concave of dawning stars. The camp fires in the village reared long towers of light into the darkness, then fell back into a sleepy glow.

One dreaming out a sunset on the prairie could not wonder at the exquisite hyperbole of the Omaha's

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language; that tongue, nurtured amidst marvelous possibilities of fury and calm of beauty and terror, all within the sight-tiring circle of stupendous distance.

The dawn came, and by its first light the Poncas beheld their enemies encamped across the valley. Upon one side the bluff fell sheer to the river; upon the other lingered a patient and cruel foe. So it happened after many days that moans of suffering arose from the lodges on the bluff, and the Omahas laughed in their tepees, for the sound of an enemy's wailing is sweet. The sweltering suns beat upon the bare summit where the village pined, and the lips of the Poncas burned with thirst while their eyes drank of the copious floods far below them.

So it chanced one day when a cry went up through the village: "Our children are dying of thirst; let us beg mercy of our enemies!" that an unarmed brave passed out of the village and across the valley toward the camp of his foes. With tottering step he approached the tepee before which Big Axe awaited. His lips were swollen and cracked; his eyes were bleared and sunken, yet they glared as the eyes of a wolf from the darkness of a cavern.

In a hoarse, inarticulate whisper he spoke to the chief: "Pity my people, for they are dying with thirst."

There was lightning in the eyes of Muzape Tunga. "Badger!" (among the Indians a coward is often called a badger) he hissed; and he struck the suppliant down before him.

The sun burned down the glaring blue of the West. A continuous wail arose from the suffering village like the cry of pines in a gentle wind; while from the tepees of the besiegers came the sound of merry laughter that mocked like the babble of inaccessible waters!

But when the red sun touched the tops of the far hills, another form left the enclosure of the village and took its way down the hillside. As it came nearer a hush of awe fell upon the Omahas. The form was that of a squaw. With an unflinching movement she approached, seeming to hover through the mist that arose from the valley. Slowly she climbed the hillside. Not a sound passed the lips of the beholders. They seemed the figures of one dream gazing at the central idea of an exquisite other! The form emerged from the mist and stood swathed in the chromatic radiance of the evening, before the motionless figure of Muzape Tunga. The eyes of the woman and the chief met with unwavering stare. Had the glance of the former become vocal it would have been a song with the softness of the mother's lullaby, but with a meaning terrible as the battle cry of a brave.

With a languorous movement the woman raised her arms, thus allowing the many-colored skin that hung about her shoulders to slip to the ground, exposing all the dumb eloquence of her brown breasts. If sight can suggest sound, then this silent squaw's form suggested the musical dream voice of the evening pines that may swell e'er daybreak to the terrible roar of the rending whirlwind! Hers was the snake's strength, the strength that bends and is more to be feared for the certain recoil.

Out of the silence her voice broke like the voice of a sudden wind that rises in the night.

"Nunda Nu (man-heart) fears not Muzape Tunga."

The chief heard and shivered with great passion. A swift smile crossed the face of the woman, soft as a last ray of sunlight on a hill. Again the voice grew out of the hush.

"The heart of Muzape Tunga is strong like his arm; yet kind like his eye; he will spare my people."

The chief's great breast heaved with the pleasure of his eye and ear. "Nunda Nu has the heart of a man and the glance of a fawn," he said; "her voice is the song of a forest stream; Muzape Tunga spares her people."

Nunda Nu turned her face to the village and made a signal with her uplifted hands. Soon an unarmed Ponca, manifestly a chief by his garments, was seen taking his way down the hillside.

"Come," said Nunda Nu, turning to Big Axe, "my father bears the pipe of peace; let us meet him in the valley."

Without a word the chief followed the squaw while his warriors stared after him in wonderment.

In the valley, midway between the village and the camp, the chiefs met; then both sitting cross-legged upon the grass, the Ponca lit the pipe of peace, and having puffed silently for a while, handed it to his conqueror. The sweet smoke of the red willow arose slowly over the silent three, and Big Axe stared abstractedly into the mounting vapor. The evening grew old. The sunlight left the summits of the hills and the shadows deepened. Still Big Axe did not speak, but gazed with wide eyes into the ascending cloud of smoke. The heart of the terrible warrior had grown tender; a light softer than the twilight was in his eyes. It seemed that he could hear the slumbrous singing voice of a squaw and the prattle of children. There were pictures for him in the rising smoke.

Suddenly he took the pipe from his mouth and returned it to the Ponca chief. "We will bury the tomahawk," he said; "our ponies shall sweat no more in the battle, but in the paths of the bison. No more shall our faces be cruel

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with war paint."

Again there was silence but for the rhythmic puffing of the Ponca's pipe. Again Muzape Tunga spoke, and his voice was sonorous with passion:

"The eyes of Nunda Nu are deep and dark as a mountain lake; her voice is a song that the slow wind sings in the willows; give me Nunda Nu that my lodge may be filled with laughter; give her to Muzape Tunga that peace may be everlasting between us."

There was a silence. The Ponca half forgot his pipe; he puffed deliberately and at long intervals. The ascending smoke dwindled to a thin gray thread. With steadfast gaze the smoker looked before him into the darkness, for his thoughts were deep. Suddenly he laid the pipe beside him and arose to his feet, extending his hand to Big Axe; his voice was tremulous as he spoke:

"Muzape Tunga asks a great thing of his conquered brother; had he asked a hundred ponies with feet fleet as the winds of winter his brother would have laughed at the little gift. Nunda Nu is my life; I give my life to my brother."

Already the night had spread into the West and the darkness hid their parting.

* * * *

Some days afterward at sunset an Omaha maiden stood upon a hill near her village. With hand at brow she peered into the blue distance. Suddenly a cry of delight trembled on her lips. A cloud of dust had grown far away upon the verge of a hill, slowly resolving itself into a long line of warriors approaching at a gallop. The column drew nearer. The face of the watching maiden grew darker with anxiety as a brilliant cloud darkens when the twilight falls. She beheld the masterful form of Big Axe, mounted upon a black pony, riding in advance of the band; yet her face darkened. Her brows lowered with the strain of her intense gaze. Was it a squaw who rode upon a pony white as a summer cloud beside her warrior? A shout went up from the village below. The speed of the ponies was increased to a fast gallop; the band swept up the valley.

A strange, low cry fell from the lips of the maiden; a stifled cry like that of a sleeping brave who feels the blade of a treacherous foe man at his heart.

In the village was the sound of many glad voices; but in the darkness of the hill above, a frail form buried its face in the dry bunch grass and uttered a moan that no one heard.

* * * *

The autumn passed; the cold winds came down from the North, shaking the snow from their black wings and the people of the village began to look upon Shadow Flower with awe and fear. For never a word had she spoken to anyone since the returning of the band. With a dull light in her eyes she wandered about muttering to herself: "It was summer when they left; now the prairie is so cold and white, so cold and white." Absent-mindedly she would dwell upon the bitter words, gazing beneath her hand into the cold white glare of the horizon. Then her eyes would blaze with gladness. "Shonga saba, shonga saba!" (a black pony, a black pony) she would cry ecstatically; and for one intense moment her frail frame would be erect and quivering with joy. Then the light in her eye would fade as the fires fade in a camp that is deserted; a cry of anguish would fall from her lips, her hand would drop lifelessly from her brow. "No," she would sigh languidly, "no, it is only a cloud; O the prairie is so white and cold, so white and cold!"

And the old people shook their heads and whispered to each other: "The soul of Pazha Hu has followed the summer, for her soul loved the flowers; can you not hear her body crying for her soul?"

When the warm winds came again and the hills were green, the crying of a young child was heard from the tepee of Big Axe. The simple heart of the stern warrior throbbed with gladness as a cold seed throbs with the blowing of the southwind.

But the sound of the infant's voice brought no summer to the heart of Nunda Nu. The touch of its little brown fingers stung her breasts, and as she looked upon its face, placid or expressive as its dream took form or slept, a cold shudder ran through her veins as when one gazes on a snake, for it was the child of an enemy. All through the long tedious winter a slow hate had sapped the kindness from the heart of the future mother; and when she felt the new life throbbing into form, her thoughts grew bitter. So now the unforgotten moaning of the children of her people, dying with thirst upon the barren summit, was loud enough to drown the prattle of her enemy's child

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which should have wrought enchantment in her blood.

One night a noiseless shadow passed among the tepees hushed in slumber beneath the moonlight. It crept up to the tepee of Muzape Tunga and crouched in an attitude of listening. The bugs chirped and hummed, the frogs croaked, the wolves howled far away; save these and a sleeper's heavy breathing there was silence.

Suddenly there was a faint sound as of some one moving in the tepee; the shadow outside arose and the moonlight fell upon its haggard face, the face of Shadow Flower. She placed her eye to a small opening in the skins that covered the poles. Now she would gaze upon the child of Mazupe Tunga!

Through the opening at the top of the tepee the moonlight entered with intense brilliance and fell upon three faces. One was the face of her once sweet dream and the face that trembled through the visions of her madness, Muzape Tunga's. One was the beautiful cruel face of her who came upon a pony white as a summer cloud that autumn evening when the gladness left the prairie. One was a face that she had not seen before, yet her poor heart ached as she looked upon it. It was the face of his child, her child; ah, it should have been the child of Shadow Flower, she thought, and her brain whirled with sudden madness.

As she looked, the woman in the tepee raised herself upon her elbow. She gazed upon the peaceful face of Big Axe. The moon lit up her features in clear relief. Her eyes were terrible with hate, the lids drawn closely about them till they had the small, beady appearance of the snake's. Her lips were drawn tightly across her white teeth in a cold grin. Her whole form trembled as with a chill, yet the night was warm. Then she arose and with a noiseless step sought for something hung upon the dark side of the tepee. She returned, clutching a tomahawk. The light caught her whole form, till it stood out clear-cut like a statue — a statue of a prairie Judith.

Then she bent over the form of Muzape Tunga for one moment hushed with terror. There was a dull sound as the weapon entered the sleeper's skull; but more than this there was no sound, no groan. And the one who stood like a shadow without the tepee was stricken dumb with fright.

Then the woman within turned to the sleeping child and raised the dripping tomahawk; but her arm seemed to freeze in act to strike, and the blow did not fall. A strange soft light crept into the face of the woman. She lowered her arm and laid the weapon aside beside the sleeping child; then with the step of a wild cat she crept to the entrance of the tepee, and gazing cautiously about for a moment, slipped cautiously into the haze of the moonlight, and was engulfed in the darkness of the valley.

As the dim outline of the fleeing squaw mixed itself with the uncertain haze and vanished, a great happiness leaped into the stagnant veins of Shadow Flower, and her blood rushed like a stream when the ice melts with the breath of the south wind.

Even the thought that Muzape Tunga lay dead within the tepee did not quell her happiness, for she said to herself: "Now Pazha Hu shall have her warrior; he shall be all hers."

She crept into the tepee, and kneeling put her lips to the chilling lips of Big Axe. He did not breathe. She placed her arms about his body, her face upon his breast, yet he did not move. He lay quietly with the intense moonlight upon his face. She did not sob, she was even happy; for did she not at last possess that for which she had pined?

Suddenly her dream was broken by the crying of the child. She took it in her arms and pressed it to her breast, humming a low lullaby, half believing it to be her own. But the child was frightened by the strange voice and cried piteously. Then Shadow Flower thought: "It cries for its father, yet its father has gone." "Hush," she said to the child, "we will go and find the soul of Mazupe Tunga; it cannot be so very far away."

She wrapped a blanket about the infant, muffling its cries, and tied it about her shoulders. Then she went silently through the village and out into the prairie, weird with the blue haze of the moon and the lonesome cries of the wolves.

A rabbit hopped past and stopped at some distance, as if gazing in wonder at the lone maiden.

"O Rabbit!" cried Shadow Flower, "tell me, have you seen the soul of Muzape Tunga!"

The rabbit moved its long ears, awed by the strangeness of the voice; then it hopped away into the shades; the maiden followed and was swallowed by the moonlit mist.

* * * *

When the sun looked into the village the women were stricken with terror and the men with anger. The wise people shook their heads by which to say: "Ah, yes; we feared such things of Nunda Nu."

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The days passed; the moons came and went. Yet Shadow Flower did not return. There was a common thought concerning her disappearance which was never spoken aloud; but when the fires burned low and the night grew late it was often whispered with awe:

"She has gone in search of her soul; it fled last year with the summer."