

Little Wolf

John G. Neihardt

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HE would never be a strong waschuscha (a brave); when he was born he was no bigger than a baby coyote, littered in a terrible winter after a summer of famine. That was what the braves said as they sat in a circle about the fires; and often one would catch him, spanning his little brown legs with a contemptuous forefinger and thumb, while the others found much loud mirth in ridiculing this bronze mite who could never be a brave.

Then the object of their mirth would tug himself loose from his tormentors, displaying his white sharp teeth with a whimper that was half a growl, and would slink away into the shades where the fire-light did not reach. Whereupon the braves would call after him, in their good-natured cruelty: "Mixa Zhing, Mixa Zhing" (Little Wolf).

So, in accordance with infallible psychic laws, Little Wolf became what he was considered and fulfilled his wild name to the letter. One day in one of his most vulpine moods, while trotting among the hills on all fours, stopping now and then to sit upon his haunches and give forth a series of howls, in imitation of his namesakes, he had discovered a deserted hole in the hillside, of which he immediately made himself the growling possessor. And to make this play metempsychosis the more real, he had spirited from the tepee of his father a complete wolf's hide, clad in which Little Wolf spent the greater part of the time prowling among the hills with an intense wolfish hate for all mankind gnawing at his heart.

It was a summer evening. Little Wolf, sitting upon the top of a hill, gazed down upon the circle of tepees, which was the village of his people. As he looked, the silent vow he had made, never to go back to his tribe, but to be a wolf with the wolves, slowly became shapeless, then indistinct, then it vanished altogether. For the smoke, rising slowly from the various fires, told a savory tale of supper to his eyes; and the light wind brought to his keen nostrils the scent of boiling kettles, which acted as a sort of footnote to the tale of the smoke, finally clinching the argument of the text.

So the little wolf fell from his high resolve, as the wolf skin fell from his back, and he forthwith slipped from his perch, and trotted down the hillside, at every step degenerating, as he thought, into just such a common shinga zinga (little baby).

Having cautiously approached a fire, Little Wolf sat upon the ground with his knees huddled up to his chin, and watched the deft hands of the women tending the baking of the squaw corn cakes and the yellow watuh (a small pumpkin), in the embers. The old women, their backs bent with their loads, carried bundles of fagots from the thicket nearby, and placed them upon the fires that flared up with a voice like the wind's, making a small circular day amid the gathering shadows. The air was pleasant with the sound and scent of bubbling kettles; some filled with the meat of the ta (buffalo) or the tachuga (antelope); some ebullient with the savory zhew muncka, the tea of the prairie. And as Little Wolf sat and looked upon this suggestive scene, a great wave of sympathetic kindness passed through his small body. And especially did the wolfishness of his little heart melt into an indefinite feeling of humanity, while his eyes followed the form of the maiden Hinnagi as she bustled about the kettles. In his childish mind he was already wielding the stone axe with mighty force in some mysterious battle beyond the hills; and it was all for her.

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His eyes grew big with the dream he was dreaming. He stared into the fire as he thought the vivid thoughts of ambitious youth. The flame fell and crept into the embers. Then reality came back to him as the shadows came. Something of the wonted wolfishness tugged at his breast as he thought of what the braves had said. He could never be a strong brave! With an awful bitterness this thought grew upon him, and even a full stomach could not quite ease the pang at his throat.

After the evening meal the war drums were brought into the open space about which the tepees were built. For upon the morrow the entire band of the tribe's warriors would ride against their enemies, the Sioux, and to-night they would dance a war dance that their courage might not fail.

The drums were placed in a small circle; before each an old man, who had seen many battles ere the eagle glance faded from his eyes, sat cross-legged, holding a drum-stick in either hand. About these the braves gathered in a larger circle. The yellow and red light of the camp fires made more terrible their faces, fierce with the war paint.

In another circle, at some distance from that of the braves, waited the women, dressed in their brightest garments of dyed buckskin.

At a signal from the head chief of the tribe, the snarling thunder of the war drums began. The two motionless circles suddenly became two rings of gyrating color. The beaded moccasins twinkled like a chain of satellites swinging about the fagot fire for a sun! The shout of the braves arose above the cadence of the drum beats; and the monotonous song of the women grew like a night wind in a lonesome valley.

Tum — tum—um, tum — tum—um! went the drums, ever faster, ever louder, inciting the dancers to delirious fury. The neglected fires dwindled into embers. The shout of the braves and the droning of the women ceased. Darkness fell upon the circles. The dancers moved swiftly through the dusk like ghosts in a mid-night orgy. There was no sound save the snarling beat of the drums and the shuffle of wild feet.

Then the moon, big-eyed with wonder, arose above the hills, pouring a pale light upon the dance. Little Wolf, who had been huddling closely against a tepee with an unintelligible fear, now felt the delirium of the dance for the first time. He leaped to his feet with a shout that echoed strange and hoarse from the hills! The whole village, as though awakened from a spell, caught the cry and sent it trembling up the gulches. With the hot blood pounding at his temples Little Wolf swung into the frenzy of the dance. He leaped like the antelope when it catches the scent of the hunter. He was no longer the shinga zinga who could never be a brave. The fanaticism of the savage was upon him. With his head thrown back until it caught the full glare of the moon, he danced! It was not a child's face that the pale light struck: it was the face of a fiend! The unfettered wind of the prairie was in his lungs. The swiftness of the elk was in his feet! He danced till the hills whirled about him in a dance of their own. He danced till the moon reeled like a sick man. He danced till his chest felt crushed as by the hug of a grizzly. He danced till the stars and the moon went out, and there was nothing but darkness and a deep, deep oppressive something like slumber upon him.

The sun was far up in the heavens when he awoke, lying upon the ground where he had fallen with fatigue. He rubbed his eyes and looked about him; but the circle of the dance had vanished, the war-drums were still. The warriors had ridden out of the village into that mysterious region beyond the hills where great deeds awaited to be done! Only the women and children and old men lingered in the village. Then there came upon Little Wolf that overpowering thought of bitterness. He was only a shinga zinga; he could never be a brave. No, but he would be a wolf; he would live in howling loneliness among the hills!

Yet that day as he prowled about clad in his wolf skin, he was conscious of not being half so good a wolf as the day before. He did not find it quite within his power to hate his people with whom he had felt the delirium of the war dance. The snarling beat of the war drums had awakened in him a vital interest in the great prairie tragedy of food-getting and war-making.

Little Wolf

Several days passed and the warriors had not returned. Little Wolf was sitting beside the deserted hole which was his den, thinking great thoughts of the future as he basked in the horizontal glare of the evening sun. As he looked with half-shut eyes across the hills, his dreaming was suddenly arrested by the sight of what seemed a number of bunches of grass moving along the brow of the hill on the other side of the valley in which the village lay. As he looked and wondered at this fantastic dance of the grasses, there was a wild shout from the opposite hill, and a small band of Otoes, their heads covered with grass that they might the more easily creep upon their foes, rushed down the hillside toward the defenseless village.

Terrified by the suddenness of the shout and the attack, Little Wolf scrambled into his hole like any other little wolf, and crouched in the darkness, shivering with fear.

Some time passed, during which he could hear the wail of the women and the victorious cries of the Otoes; then the noises ceased. With a great pang of remorse the consciousness of his cowardice came upon Little Wolf. He had crept into a hole like any badger! Then he thought of Hinnagi! He crawled out of the hole and ran down the hill into the village, with his wolf skin still upon his back. There amid the tepees he saw the bodies of some of the old men who had attempted resistance. But the time of their prowess was past.

"Hinnagi, Hinnagi!" called Little Wolf.

He listened and heard only the wail of women from the lodges. It was the custom of the Otoes to carry off the fairest daughters of the enemy as the spoil of war. Little Wolf thought of this with a pang at his heart. A great indefinite resolve of heroism came upon him. He ran out of the village and down the valley, keeping the trail of the enemy. When he had gone some distance he came upon some grazing ponies that the Otoes had abandoned for the fresher ones from the herd of the Omahas. Mounting one of these, he turned its head down the trail, urging its weary limbs into a gallop by plying his heels upon its ribs.

The shades of the valley crept slowly up the hills and the golden glow faded from the summits. Little Wolf urged the stumbling pony into the darkness. As he rode the frenzy that he had felt in the war dance came upon him. His temples throbbed and his heart beat to the time of the snarling drums! To him the night wind seemed heavy with noble deeds awaiting to be given life and voices of thunder for the ears of men! In some indefinite way he felt that to-night he would become a strong waschuscha. The Otoes had stolen the ponies and the women and — his heart beat louder — Hinnagi. He would save them! Little did he know how; yet he would save them. Then the braves would not laugh at him, but would let him ride with them to battle. And, maybe, some time Hinnagi would be his squaw!

Suddenly rounding the base of a hill, the pony stopped short and pricked up its ears, sniffing the wind that came up a gulch. Little Wolf, aroused from his musing, soon understood the abruptness of the pony; he smelled smoke.

Slipping to the ground, he crawled on his hands and knees up the gulch in the direction from which the scent of the smoke came. Soon he reached the end of the gulch, and looking into a small valley saw through the gloom a number of rudely constructed tepees.

Breathlessly he listened. For awhile there was no sound except the crackling of the low fires and the flap of the blankets about the poles of the tepees. Then, as he listened, there came to his ears a low, mournful wail as of a night wind in the scrub oaks of a bluff! Having satisfied himself that the Otoes slept soundly, Little Wolf crawled in the direction of the wall and disappeared in the gloom. Some moments afterwards an Otoe brave suddenly awoke from his heavy slumber. In the weird glow of the falling fires he beheld at the entrance of his tepee a gray wolf standing motionless.

The brave raised himself upon his elbow, uttering a grunt of terror as of one who feels a nightmare and would cry out were not his tongue frozen in his mouth.

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The wolf with a startled movement whispered hoarsely in the Omaha tongue: "The Omaha; they come! fly! fly!"

The Otoe brave leaped to his feet, every limb growing cold with fear. He rubbed his eyes and stared at the darkness. The wolf had vanished!

Now, an Indian believes weird things, and the warning of a talking wolf was not a thing to be despised, even though it were dreaming. So the Otoe gave a shout that rang up the hills and made the grazing ponies snort and tug at their lariats! Soon the entire band was rushing about the camp.

"The Omaha! The Omaha!" cried the brave. "Fly! fly! for lo, a gray wolf came to my tepee and spoke to me in a dream!"

"Fly!" echoed the whole band, delirious with fear. "Kill the squaws! Kill the squaws!" they shouted. For in their flight they could not be burdened with their spoils, and they would not leave them to their enemies.

There was the sound of the shrieking of women; then the gallop of hoofs; then silence.

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Two days afterward, the Omahas, having returned to their stricken village, made the trail of the fleeting Otoes thunderous with pursuing hoofs. Suddenly topping the hill that overlooked the deserted camp of their enemies, they beheld the bodies of the slain women strewn amid the tepees. Over one of these a gray wolf stood. There was a shout from the foremost of the Omaha warriors: a dozen arrows sang in the air and quivered in the body of the beast. It rolled upon its side with a cry half human.

A group of braves, riding up to the body of the woman, dismounted and pulled the blanket from its face.

It was Hinnagi.

With a savage kick one turned the still quivering wolf upon its back. The gray hide fell from an emaciated brown face, twitching with the agony of death.

It was Little Wolf!