

The Philosophy of Gray Eagle

by

Wolcott LeClear Beard



HE rose from the battlefield upon which he had been left for dead early the day before, and it was now evening—he, Gray Eagle, war-chief of the Sioux. His body was stiff, and ached from many wounds. His head throbbed, with a sound in his brain like that of distant drums. Still, he drew himself proudly to his full height and adjusted his war-bonnet. He had reason for pride. Even his late antagonists recognized that in him there had fallen a mighty warrior, and had left his scalp untouched. This is the greatest tribute that a brave man can win from those foes—and the rarest.

As he stalked slowly away, he smiled contemptuously at the devils and the ghosts of slain enemies that whispered in his ears. He knew why they were thus persistent; it was to drown the lowest, but still the clearest voice of all—that of Red Bird, his only wife, who was calling to him over the many-miles that separated them. Neither ghosts nor devils could drown that voice.

By this time, Gray Eagle reckoned, the news of the Sioux defeat must have reached their villages, borne there by the few who had escaped. In many tepees women would

bewail the deaths of their lords that night; but none, he knew, would be mourned more deeply than would he, Gray Eagle—a mighty warrior, it is true, but still an old man, scarred and toughened by fights innumerable, by savage beasts he had slain and by many marches, long and waterless; while Red Bird was young, and by far the most beautiful of her tribe.

His smile lost its expression of contempt and became almost tender as he thought of the joyful surprise that would be hers when he should return. And as the thought entered his mind, the whispers of the ghosts and devils lessened and then, for a space, ceased entirely, leaving only the voice of Red Bird, who called, as she thought, in vain.

A pony, with the red war-sign painted large on its white haunch, had been wounded and, like the old chief himself, left for dead. But the wound had staunched of itself, the pony had scrambled to its feet, and now was greedily cropping the lush, corpse-strewn prairie grass.

The chief called. Raising its head, the pony whinnied, for it had become lonely, as horses will, and longed for companionship. Without resistance it allowed itself to be

caught. Summoning all his strength, Gray Eagle vaulted stiffly onto the puma skin which served as a saddle, and turned the head of his mount, with that unerring instinct for direction which is the birthright of his race, toward the spot where stood his own tepee.

The night settled down, clear and starlit. A little breeze fanned the old chief's face, hot from the fever of his wounds. The spirits of Gray Eagle rose. He began a long chant, harsh from the dryness of his throat, which recounted all of his many deeds, forgetting not one. The drums that sounded in his head kept the measured cadence, and even the hills between which he now was riding seemed to nod their heads in time, and to boom a thunderous accompaniment.

Again and again the little horse stumbled, only to be jerked relentlessly to its feet and forced ahead. Three-fourths of the long journey was completed when it began to leave a trail of dark, crimson blotches that looked black in that light, on the path it traveled. But the chief sang on, oblivious of all but his song. Even the voice of Red Bird no longer reached his ears, filled with the tales of his own achievements. He raised his arms, appealing to the Great Spirit, that it might bear witness to the truth of what he said.

He seemed to hear a mighty voice raised in reply when, without warning, the pony fell, and lay dying. Thrown violently from his seat, Gray Eagle crashed to the ground and for a time all was blackness.

When at last he regained consciousness, the night was far spent. For a time he could not remember where he was; then the waning half moon threw a beam of pale light on the pony's body, and Gray Eagle remembered. He tried to regain his feet, but his knees bent under him weakly, and he fell back.

Then it was that the mighty voice came

once more, seeming to fill all the air, though it was not loud, and to make the earth tremble. By this the chief knew that he heard the Great Spirit itself, and bowing his head, he listened.

"Thou hast called to me that I might witness to thy glory," the voice said. "To *thy* glory, and thine alone. For what, to thee, is the welfare of thy tribe, even now that it hath met defeat, when compared to this glory of thine? Nothing! Even though many lodges are empty of men, to, thee thine own glory is all!"

The chief lay prone, his face on the ground, and his body trembling. For the first time in his long life, he knew fear. His voice was weak and shaking.

"I have sinned, O Spirit!" he cried. "I have sinned the sin of Pride."

The voice replied: "Thou hast said it."

"Great Spirit, I now see my sin, and I repent," quavered the wounded chief. "What deed may I do that I may be purged of that sin?"

"Thou mayest humble thyself. By that, and by that alone, can the sin be purged. For one year from the time thou reachest thy lodge, thou and thine shall live as dogs—as dogs that lurk on the outskirts of the village, living on the scraps that are thrown out to them.

For a little the pride of Gray Eagle rose within him and fought, but he crushed it down.

"So be it, O Spirit!" he cried.

The reply came: "It is well, for thee and thy tribe also. Drink, and let thy weakness cease. Then go."

As the last words were spoken, though Gray Eagle saw no clouds gather, forked lightning darted across the sky. This loosened the rain drops from the place where they had been stored. They fell on the bare body of the chief, cooling its fever. They fell

on the hills, which gathered them in tiny watercourses that seamed their sides, and sent tiny streams bubbling and chattering, to the valley. At one of these the chief drank, and was refreshed. After he had done so, the rain fell no longer, and the watercourses became mere wet streaks on the hillsides.

Slowly and painfully, Gray Eagle continued his way toward the spot where stood his own lodge, his heart heavy within him. But still, with bowed head, he plodded steadily on. It was dawn when he reached his village. A maiden, going for water to a spring, saw him, and cried the joyful news of his return, so that all could hear.

There were many answering cries. For his people knew that their old war-chief could lead them again to battle with their foes, that the shame of defeat might be wiped out by victory. All the village poured forth to meet him, but the first was Red Bird, who took the hand of her lord and placed it upon her head; then, with an arm around his waist, helped him to the lodge where they dwelt together.

They would have questioned him, but he held up his hand for silence. Also they saw that his face was grave and stern even beyond its custom. Therefore they drew to one side until he went into his lodge, taking Red Bird with him, and dropped the flap of skin that closed the entrance.

Many wondered what had befallen, and many guesses were made, but none of them hit upon the truth. Cries and the sound of pleading, in the voice of Red Bird, could be heard, still further whetting curiosity. But these sounds were speedily stilled.

Then Gray Eagle came forth, and went to the lodge of his friend, Apalocha, where he remained long in earnest conversation before returning to his own.

But a little while afterward Gray Eagle appeared once more; this time with Red Bird

behind him, clad only in a blanket. Except for a loin-cloth, her lord was naked. Apalocha cleared the way, and between two lines of their wondering tribes-people, and looking neither to one side nor the other, they left the village, creeping into the brushwood that surrounded it, and for the time were seen no more.

Then it was that Apalocha told what had happened. All understood. The thought that the delirium of fever had caused their old chief to undertake this penance crossed no mind in the tribe—save one.

That mind was the mind of Red Bird. She obeyed her lord. She had no choice. But she thought her lot far harder even than his, and perhaps it was.

Though she had sinned in no way, yet half of the penance was hers to perform. Though the men, one and all, honored Gray Eagle for what he had done, her part was an unconsidered portion of his.

And so they lived as dogs live. It is true that many savory dishes were placed where they could find them, and these they devoured. The penitent chief permitted this—for would dogs not do the same?

Winter came, with its rains and cold. Many times did Red Bird wish that she might die, but she was young and strong, and so death was denied her.

Her love for her lord long since had disappeared—it had gone with her admiration of him. Then there came into her life that which mitigated her lot in a measure, while it deepened immeasurably the humiliation of her lord.

A young brave of the Ogallala Sioux, Eteschewa by name, had been wounded in the leg, and had taken refuge with his kinsmen until such time as he could ride again. He saw Red Bird, and his heart grew weak as her beauty met his eyes. He knew, as all men knew, of the penance. And

knowing this, he did what none other dared to attempt.

He took dainty food, and calling to her as one would call a dog, he offered her this food. She came and took it eagerly from his hand, while he caressed her, as favorite dogs are caressed.

None of this escaped Gray Eagle. At first his soul rose in rebellion: then he put all thought of rebellion away from him. They were dogs, he and she, and to the end he would play the part faithfully, that his penance might be complete. Nevertheless, the bitterness of what he saw was greater by far than the bitterness of death. And he never allowed her for an instant out of his sight. That was in no way inconsistent with his vow.

Rumors of another raid on the part of their enemy, who had conquered them before, were rife in the village. They reached the ears, even of Gray Eagle, the Dog. But the time of his penance was wearing to its close, and for this he thanked the Great Spirit with all the strength of his humbled heart.

The rumors became certainties. Preparations for a coming campaign were being made; all the village was busied with them. Then was the time of the war-chief's—for he had not been deposed—greatest agony of mind; agony of the sort which sets that of the body at naught.

But the last day of the penance arrived at length. At noon it was ended. At noon, his head held high, and followed by Red Bird, Gray Eagle reentered his lodge, and dropped the curtain behind him, shortly afterward to emerge, his war bonnet on his head, the horizontal streaks of paint across his face, and in his hands, his weapons.

Loyal friends had caught his ponies for him. Lightly as a young man could have done, he vaulted to the back of the beast, and accompanied by the shrills yells of women,

and the thunder of many hoofs, once more started at the head of his braves, to lead them against their ancient enemies. Of all the women, Red Bird alone did not join in these cries of encouragement and applause. For a time she stood in the portal of the lodge, watching the band of her kinsmen until it was out of sight. Then, with a sneer, she went within.

It was long before Gray Eagle returned. When he did, it was with a visibly lessened band of braves, but with glory enough to wipe out the former defeat, and to spare. Many were the scalps they brought, many the ponies and weapons. Therefore, while there was mourning in the village, there also was rejoicing there. Gray Eagle took his honors meekly, giving the greater part of the credit to those who followed him. Yet the glory of his name waxed greater than ever before.

But he missed the fair face of Red Bird, formerly the first upon which his eyes would fall. Shaking himself loose from the crowd of flatterers, he strode to his lodge.

It was empty. His face dark with anger, Gray Eagle went into the village, demanding information, which he could see trembling on every tongue, but which none dare suffer to speak. It was a very old woman who, at last, summoned courage sufficient to tell him what, by that time, he had suspected. Red Bird had gone with Eteschewa, and was then living in his lodge, among the Ogallalas.

The braves of Gray Eagle, hearing this, started once more for their ponies, sure that a command to mount and ride would follow instantly. And indeed, such an order nearly had crossed the chief's lips before he had time to think. The insult was deadly; hate and revenge rose in him as never had they done before.

Nothing but the most complete revenge would suffice. He had at his command, it is true, enough men to wipe out that section of

the Ogallalas—but what would be the use? He could only slay Eteschewa, who probably would die fighting, and Red Bird, knowing what awaited her, undoubtedly would kill herself. What he desired was a revenge that never would leave their memories.

Now, in his year of penance, the war-chief had much leisure for meditation, especially upon the ways of women. Therefore, being wise, he threw back his head, laughing long and loud. Striding to his *remuda*, he picked out four of his best horses, and called to him one of his young braves.

“Go to the lodge of Eteschewa, among the Ogallalas.” he commanded. “Say you to him that these horses come as a gift from Gray Eagle. And say also that the heart of

Gray Eagle is bowed in sorrow because he cannot offer a gift which, at least in some small part, might tend to reconcile Eteschewa for the great misfortune which he has taken upon himself to endure.”

The young man laughed and departed. Then Gray Eagle turned to his wondering friend. Apalocha.

“Thinking that she hath caused no pain by her departure from my lodge, she will sorrow, after the manner of her kind,” he explained. “Also soon will she begin to hate Eteschewa, who abetted her act. And, on his part, he will hold her cheaply, and shortly cease to desire her. Thus is my revenge accomplished, for in this way will misery come upon them which will last for the rest of their lives—and may they live long!”