

THE FLIGHT OF THE RED HORSE.

A DAKOTA LEGEND.

"My son, Woneya, I must make
A journey to the Sacred Lake.
Far to the north, 'mid ice and snow,
A long, long way it is I go.
An arrow flying all the night
Would fail to reach it in its flight.
You are my son; I give to-day
Full leave to all your childish play.
All things are thine; go where you will,
Save to the Red House on the hill.
Try not its door, turn not the key;
There death and ruin wait for thee,
But how and why I may not tell,
For there is laid on me a spell,
So all my love must turn to hate,
And no man can escape his fate."

Washaka goes. In boyish play
The child wears out the summer day;
He swims the stream, his crafty hook
Draws shining treasure from the brook;
The chattering squirrel hugs his limb
As the swift arrow grazes him.
But ever, as he played, he said,
"What is there in the House of Red?"
Go where he would, each pathway still
Led to the Red House on the hill.

At last he stands before the door,
With mystic symbols pictured o'er.
"What could my father mean," he said,
"To keep me from the House of Red?"
Ah, no! he will not disobey;
Although the sire is far away;
And yet, what harm could come of it
For him to see which key would fit?

And now he tries them, one by one,
Until the last—what has he done?
Some thoughtless pressure of the lock,
The door flies open with a shock.
Strange tremors run along the ground;
The world is full of direful sound;
Strange voices talk; strange whispers rise;
Strange portents in the earth and skies.
Through the wide door the youth can see
All that there is of mystery.
Before him stood a Horse of Red,
With mane of gold, who sternly said:
"Unhappy boy! what have you done?
Washaka now must slay his son."

Struck down with terror and remorse,
The youth falls prone before the horse.
"Oh, help me, help!" Woneya cries,
With gasping breath and streaming eyes.
"Teach me some way; show me the path
Where I may flee my father's wrath."
The horse replies: "The wrong is great,
Yet I have pity for thy fate.
One way alone is left to flee,
With perils fraught to thee and me.
I charge thee, on thy life, thy soul,
To yield thee up to my control.
Look neither backward, left, nor right;
Be brave, and yield no place to fright.
Thy father now will try each art
To strike a terror to thy heart;
But if thy heart begin to quail,
That instant all my strength will fail;
And if Washaka us o'ertake,
I, too, must perish for thy sake.
Take in thy hand this conjurer's sack.
Away! away! Spring to my back!"

So said, so done. Away they sped.
The dark sky clamored overhead;
A mighty wind blew from the east,
Which momentarily its force increased;
The sun went down, but, through the night,
He holds his tireless, even flight.
No need is there for spur or rein;
Life is the prize he strives to gain.
But, though the horse flies like the wind,
The father presses hard behind,
And, ere the break of morn appears,
A dreadful voice is in their ears:
"Stop! stop! thou traitor, while my knife
Shall quickly end your wretched life."
"Beware! beware! Turn not your head!
Be brave! be brave!" the Red Horse said.
"Put now your hand within the sack;
What first you find throw quickly back."
Woneya in an instant found
An egg, and tossed it to the ground:
It bursts, it spreads—a wide morass,
Through which the father may not pass:
Fierce lightnings fire Washaka's eyes
As westward still the Red Horse flies.

Long time the father sought, in vain,
Some passage o'er the marsh to gain,
Where long-necked lizards basked or fought,
Where winged dragons ruin wrought,

Where serpents coiled and hissed, whose
breath
Rolled up in clouds of fire and death.
At last he throws the magic bone,
Which turns that teeming life to stone;
And where he picks his careful way,
There are the Bad Lands to this day.

The morn blooms in the eastern sky;
The day comes on, the noon is nigh;
The noon is past, the sun is low,
The evening red begins to glow;
But, driven still by sorest need,
Still swift and swifter flies the steed.
Vast, sky-rimmed plains on either side
Begin to turn in circles wide,
While rock, and shrub, and bush within
In dizzy circles spin and spin.
So swift the flight, so hot the race,
The wind blows backward in his face;
But swifter far than any wind
The father presses on behind,
And to their ears is borne the cry
That summons them again to die.
"Beware! Be brave! Turn not thy head!
Put in thy hand!" the Red Horse said;
"The first thing that thy hand shall find,
That take, and quickly hurl behind."

He draws and throws a bit of stone,
When, 'twixt the father and the son,
A range of mountains rears its height
On either hand beyond the sight.
Washaka seeks a pass in vain;
To left and right, above the plain,
The strong grim rocks confront his eyes,
While westward still the Red Horse flies.
At last he draws his feathered spear
And hurls against the rampart sheer.
So swift it dashes on the rock,
Fire-streams burst outward at the shock,
And where against the cliff he drives,
From base to top it rends and rives;
A narrow gorge is opened through,
By which Washaka may pursue.
And now the Red Horse knows the need
To lavish all his garnered speed.
His hoof-beats fall like thunder-dints,
And kindle showers of flying flints;
So swift he flies that one afar
Might deem he saw a falling star;
But swifter still upon his path
Washaka follows in his wrath.
And now that fearful voice again
Comes o'er the horror-shaken plain:
"Stop, wretches, stop! Behold the flood!
Now shall my knife run red with blood!

Who now can save you from my hate,
And who has ever conquered fate?"

Alas! what hope is left, and where?
What refuge now from blank despair?
The end is come, where shall they flee?
Before them is the open sea.
"Beware! beware! Turn not thy head.
Put in thy hand!" the Red Horse said;
"Just as we reach the ocean shore,
Draw out and quickly hurl before.
Be strong of heart. Be calm; be brave;
The sea is not to be our grave."
Woneya thrusts his hand within,
Draws forth the bead-wrought serpent's skin,
And casts it forth, when lo! a boat
Upon the gleaming waves afloat!
They gain it with a single leap
That sends it forward on the deep.
The sails are set; before the breeze
It draws its white trail o'er the seas.
In vain the bright blade of the sire
Whirls through the air in rings of fire.
He gains the beach a moment late—
What man has ever conquered fate?
Vain are his curses, vain his prayer;
The glittering waves are everywhere.

Washaka stoops along the sands,
Uproots a huge cliff with his hands;
He heaves aloft with tug and strain,
And sends it wheeling o'er the main.
High in the air it rocks and swings,
A moment to the clouds it clings;
Then, as from lofty mountain-walls,
Like some vast avalanche, it falls.
The sea shrinks, cringing, from the shock
Of that dark, shapeless bulk of rock,
Like some great fragment of a world
From out the stellar spaces hurled.
Like chaff beneath the flail outspread
The waves, and bare the ocean's bed.
One vast wall, sweeping to the west,
Bears on its topmost curving crest
The tiny boat, so feather-light,
Through all that long and fearful night.
At morn they rest, their journey done,
In a fair land beyond the sun;
And one, with awful rush and roar,
Springs tiger-like against the shore,
Drags down Washaka from the land,
And hides him 'neath the sliding sand.

Still from that coast a slender bar,
Like a long finger, stretching far,
When tides are low, points o'er the wave—
That is Washaka's lonely grave.