

THE HONOR OF BREATH FEATHER

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The Honor of Breath Feather by Anna Kalfus

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ANNA KALFUS

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BREATH FEATHER**



THE BLOWING OF THE ASHES

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BREATH FEATHER

BY

ANNA KALFUS

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For base of poem legends see the works
of Powell and Schoolcraft. For The Legend
of Itasca, A Portfolio of Indian Sketches,
Harper & Grambo, 1888.

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THE HONOR OF BREATH FEATHER

Breath Feather had sorrow, for his sister's son was dead at the worst time for him. Because of the boy Breath Feather was between his enemies, waiting for any sign of action which the breath of fate should blow him.

His sister had wrapped the boy in all his garments. She would not keep one, for he would need it in the land to which he was going. The father had seen her twine his riches around the boy, the riches of his wampum-strings, white beads, the Indian's silver, red beads, his gold, and he had said nothing as she ruined him for life. She had crowded the boy into the papoose-basket—he was rather too large for it in all his clothes. In one hand she had put a shell, white and slim like a tusk. She had whispered to the child: "Little one, under the world, by the house where the earth is red, the road forks. Take the fork of the road by the hand that holds the shell and thou shalt get home without thy mother." She had taken the best covering and wrapped it around him, around the peace-look on his face: she had corded the bundle with wild vines, and it was ready for the fire in the trench.

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To these parents everything which had been alive and changed was immortal, with the old needs of earth. They saw their departed hope comfortable and happy because of what he had taken away, and their sorrow was tempered by the joy of their ruin—but Breath Feather!

The boy had been called Little Breath Feather. It was not custom that one should be called for another, for the reason that should either die the living would be left without a name, but the boy had borne Breath Feather's name and it must drop out of speech—people did not speak the name of the dead.

He had died at an important time, when selected youths, clothed in bear skins, were to be sent out to commune with the gods in fasting and purity, with the end in view that these gods, great bears, would send some vision, warning, or sign, to advance them in life or further the interests of the band. To such neophytes come back from holy communion, new names were given and the privilege to kill a man without accounting. Breath Feather, well-spoken-of in youthful activities, had been picked as one of the youths to go before the gods, and he was going in order to get back and kill One Coyote and not pay for him. Always till now his wishes had

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come to him as easily as the feather he had leaped to take from the wind; but his sister's child had left him The Nameless One.

That he should go before the gods without a name was the worst of omens. Fifteen centuries had clothed with peculiar meaning the misfortune which had overtaken him. It was the work of a malignant throng, not men, each of which was stronger than a man. When a child he had snatched a feather from the wind and won his name, and no one had known the name of the bird from which it had fallen. The throng of Fates, in taking the boy, had leaped to snatch his name as he the wind's feather, and no one knew the loss it meant. Because of the boy he waited in strange trouble between his enemies, the moping solitary One Coyote and Old Old White Ashes, among other stolid men in the house. He waited, hating One Coyote because he had tricked him out of Soft Cloud, as Old Old White Ashes waited, hating both because they were young and had played a little with Soft Cloud, and because long joy of life might lie before one of them with the girl even then slipping in late to sit by the Great Great Grandmother and wail among the women.

One Coyote thought much, as thinking went

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in his day. He heard the women's wailing faintly because of his thoughts. His memory, going back to look at doings of The Nameless One, and bounding from one to another of these, showed him that always when The Nameless One had done something, he, One Coyote, had said it could be done; he, the thinker, had made the honor of the doer. Even when they were boys snaring little fishes with the hair of girls, Soft Cloud's had brought his great luck. He told this to his mate and got no more lucky snares—the other had snares and luck—till he had tracked Soft Cloud back for a while. But what had a youth who was just going to seek the gods and begin to be a man? Old Old White Ashes had a great oval-dome of a house thatched with dry tules and stocked with food and comfort. He would be the one who would get Soft Cloud to keep. At another thought, which was also a hope to coil around his heart-core like a quick poison-snake, he felt good cheer, Old Old White Ashes might never have a son to keep him in the recollection of the gods, in which case it would be worse for him than if he had never been born, and one enemy would be struck.

Again, The Nameless One was to have what both had most wished for and talked of, permission to go with youths sent this year to seek the