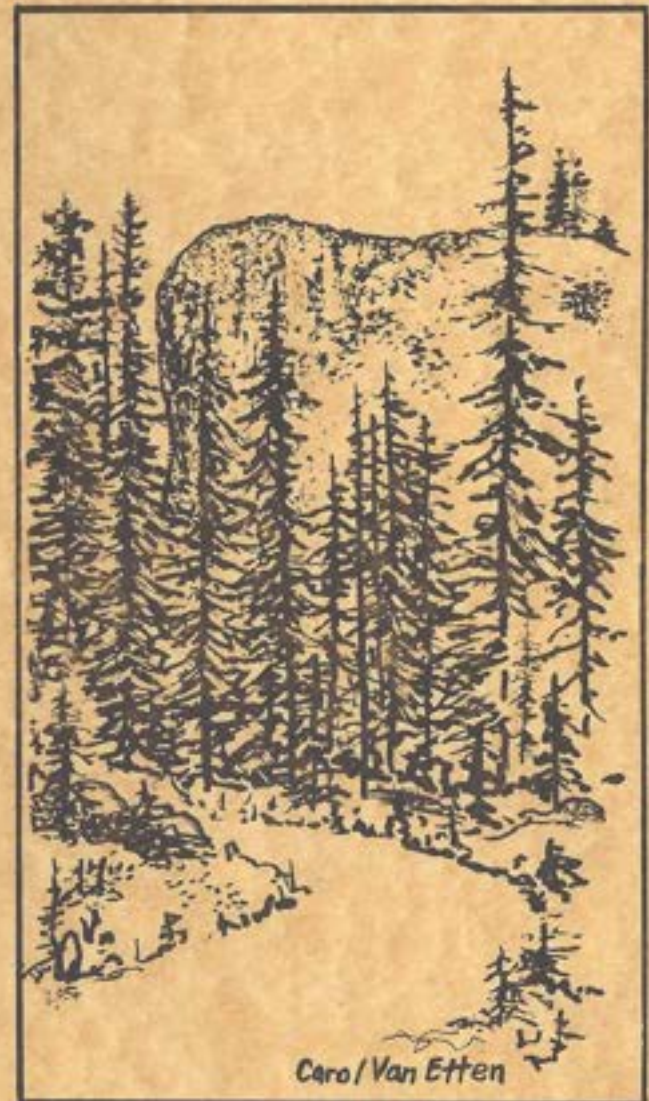


Lake Tahoe Legends



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by

Ethel Joslin Vernon



As remembered by elder members of the Washoe tribe, including the late Captain Pete and his wife Princess Agnes.

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LEGEND OF EAGLE ROCK

"I not remember so good —" the old Indian began, but was interrupted by another torrent of Washoe from Agnes, who seldom spoke anything else, although she was known to have an excellent command of the English language. After listening for a moment to her admonitions which, to the unaccustomed ear, sounded strangely like the chattering of an excited chipmunk, Pete decided to do his best at recalling the story of Chief Big Eagle. Half legend, half Washoe history, the story was slowly repeated by the old Indian as the twilight shadows deepened around the foot of Eagle Cliff.

He had been named Big Eagle because when he was still a child he had shot a huge bird of this species with a flint-headed arrow sharpened by his own hands. He was tall and very active for a man of the easy-going Washoes, and he became a chieftain while quite young, having proven his unusual abilities in various ways.

Each summer Big Eagle came into the mountains from the foothill regions, where his tribe wintered. He pitched his tepee at the sloping back of the great rock among a thick forest of young fir trees. In the early summer dawns and sometimes by bright moonlight, he would lie like a shadow along the high cliff's jutting edge watching among the trees below for game, which in those far-gone days was so plentiful here.

Down the faint wild trails that marked the woods around the base of the rock, the young doe led her spotted fawn toward the lakeshore, while buck with spreading antlers watched from the nearby shadows, and the arrows of Big Eagle brought much tender meat to the camp fires. The grey coyote, too, often walked those slim trails down to the Big Water, and sometimes sat at the foot of the rock with his sharp muzzle raised to the moon, making a perfect target for the straight arrows of the young chief. The first were always useful, even in summer, though much better after the shedding period.

There came a summer at last when Chief Big Eagle was no longer alone in his tepee and beside his camp fire, for the winter had passed when the tribe celebrated his choice of a bride. Her name was Gentle Doe and her large dark eyes were like those of her namesake. She had said shyly and earnestly, "I will follow you always, Big Eagle," and now she was always there to make his bed of furs and fir boughs, broil his deer steaks, and even snag fish for his breakfast from the boulder at the Lake's edge.

It was in the early June dawn — oh, very early this dawning — for many stars were still twinkling and the round moon was just sinking behind the western range. Big Eagle lay at the cliff's edge, his bow strung taut, his arrow ready, watching the long shadows that stretched eastward

from the pine trunks below. Among those shadows in the early dawn, he knew the deer walked lightly. There was no meat left for the barbecue this coming night, but game was plentiful and by hunting early he was sure to bring in something.

Suddenly a twig snapped in the brush somewhere below. Out among the trees near the water's edge, a blurred shadow wavered among the deeper shades. The moon's last rays glinted dimly on a grey moving form. There was the unusual distance, of course, and the confusing dimness of dawn, but this might be his only chance for game this morning.

Big Eagle pulled his bow string. His arrow sped straight and sure. Out over the shimmering ripples of the blue Big Water a long agonized wail rose to meet the dawn. It was echoed a second later by the wild despairing cry of the young chief as he slid without caution down the steep jagged side of the rock. Swiftly he leaped and staggered through the lifting shadows and clutching underbrush till, down near the water, he fell on his knees at last beside a still grey shape. Sobbing a half-unconscious prayer to the Great Spirit, he clasped with trembling arms the form of Gentle Doe, his bride. But the Great Spirit had turned away His all-seeing eyes that morning, and His ever-listening ears were deaf to that savage prayer. There came a low moan and the soft, halting promise, "I will follow you always, Big Eagle," and the spirit of Gentle Doe was gone on the grey wings of the dawning.

Some said that, when the camps were full of wailing that night, Big Eagle stood at the edge of the cliff and spoke once more to the great Spirit, asking that he might be allowed to follow his bride into the Land Beyond the Black Mountains. But the Great Spirit would not quite relent. He made only a doubtful compromise. He gave the young chieftain the form of his namesake and sent him to brood endlessly upon the high cliffs and ragged mountaintops.

For many moons after this, his tribesmen, rising at early dawn to hunt, would see a great feathered shape perched on the overhanging edge of the cliff. As still and dark as part of the rock itself, the ominous form clung there. And sometimes, just as the dawn light brightened over the shining Big Water, a wild cry sounded from the shadows on the rock on silent dark wings and drifted away over the pine tops.

VALLEY OF THE STARS

There lies a valley close beside the blue Big Water, a deep and lovely valley which, even though it is very near the lake, is divided from the great expanse of water by a mountain range. Mountains encircle it completely and the high winding highway bordering its eastern rim overlooks the western peaks of its circling range and on across the thirteen mile width of Lake Tahoe to the towering mountains beyond. From the floor of this valley on a moonless night thousands of stars may be seen which seem invisible when the sky is viewed from the mountaintops. Early in the present century this beautiful location was named Spooner Valley, after an early settler in this region, but the legendary birth of the valley does credit to the poetic imagination of the Washoe Indian tribe: It was some tens of thousands of centuries after the creation of the Lake of the Sky. Animal life and wild human tribes fought for existence throughout the mountains. The mountains were heaped, range against range, around the Big Water, and the young earth still heaved and groaned occasionally as it rolled around its orbit under the billion eyes of the stars.

The Gods of the universe laughed as they watched the wild antics of their creations, and now and then they unchained some special pet in outer space and allowed him to roam and howl for a time through Infinity. It seems it was one of these occasions when the tiny Dragon Star leaped and tugged at his leash, whining for freedom until some kind hearted custodian took pity on him and turned him loose.

He was a fiery creature, just a bundle of seething energy. Small to begin with, (probably not more than two hundred miles from his nose to his tail) it didn't take so very many years of swishing about the Heavens to wear him down to less than a fourth of his original size. When he first gained his freedom the Little Dragon has passed only a few thousand miles of the earth and growled hungrily as he looked down upon its green forests and valleys. However, greater attractions drew him on, and for the time he merely lashed his tail furiously as he passed, throwing a few million sparks into the edge of the earth's atmosphere.

Time passed, and when the Little Dragon circled once more near the earth he had dwindled and grown faded and weak. He lashed his fiery tail and snarled, fully intending to leap onward down the trails of space, but unfortunately his claws caught in the edge of the atmospheric net and the earth's attraction pulled him down. With one last thin howl he plunged earthward, and the terrific force of his fall took him straight down among a group of mountain peaks, close beside the blue Big Water.

The sharp nose of the Little Dragon burrowed deep, down —

down — down to the very heart of the planet, burying his body completely and throwing earth and rocks up in a great ring around the spot where he disappeared. There, to this day, he still stands on his head, and his hard black claws reach toward the surface, making small underground channels where waters from above may seep down to the level of the nearby lake. The Little Dragon's fiery temper was cooled down long ago and he has ceased to even whimper for help. However, his friends of the outer spaces have not forgotten him. Sometimes as centuries roll by, one of his clan wanders near the earth, howling down the lanes of space, swishing a long tail in fury and scattering thousands of sparks about the mountains.

When this happens the Indians know that his wandering cousins are seeking the lost Little Dragon, and at such times many more thousands of sparks may be seen from the valley floor than from any other point. Looking up from the deep center of the valley on any clear starry night one sees thousands of bright stars, elsewhere invisible. At certain times of year some of the stars seen from the valley look extremely large and seem to roll and flash with red and golden light, seemingly drawing nearer, then receding again. The Indians explain this by saying that the eyes of the Gods are bending near the earth to peer into the deep valley in search of their Little Dragon.



BIG CHIEF

Far back behind the shadows of a long-gone past there lived, on the mountain between Lake Tahoe's northwest shores and the canyon of the Truckee River, a tribe who were the ancestors of the later day Washoes. Their chief was a stern red giant whose physical and intellectual prowess were so unusual that no name great enough could be found for him. So his family and tribesmen simply gave up, and he was known as "Chief No Name." The chief had a daughter, but no sons, so rather than allow the chieftood to go to a man of another family in the future, he decreed that his daughter take a vow never to marry, and after the passing of her father she should reign as Chieftess throughout her lifetime. With Princess Cedar Heart this arrangement seemed well — for a time.

Time passed, and one day as she wandered in the woods Cedar Heart was surprised to hear strains of sweet music which she was certain was not the singing of the stream — nor could it be a bird of the forest. She stole nearer and nearer to the hidden source of the sound until suddenly, looking down into a rocky gorge she saw, beside a little waterfall, a brown and handsome young man who was blowing clear bird-like notes from a long, golden reed.

Cedar Heart was completely charmed by the music, whose like she had never heard before, as well as by the musician, and their meeting proved the disruption of all the ambitious plans of Chief No Name. The Princess and the musician fell in love, and after several meetings Cedar Heart decided to ask a release from her vow of nunnery, and beg that her lover be considered as a future Chieftain.

Big Chief No Name was very angry. His selfish mind at once began planning to remove this obstacle to his ambition. Although he loved his daughter, he could only think of the destruction of her lover. He called a group of his fiercest warriors, ordering them to slay the musician and bring back his scalp with its long black hair. From a secret hiding place Cedar Heart listened to the death plot. She had no hope of softening the hard heart of her father, so while the braves received instructions she fled to find the unsuspecting musician.

Under a dark pine tree, where the full moon glinted through needled boughs on the splashing waterfall, the red-brown young poet played a soft love lyric to his dark eyed Princess. Suddenly from out of the shadow Cedar Heart threw herself into his arms, whispering a warning and begging that he fly with her at once. Perhaps they might escape through the mountains and find safety in some unknown hiding place. So the young couple fled, gaining only a very short start ahead of their murderous pursuers.

The reed flute lay broken at the foot of the tall pine and from this point the chief and his followers took up the trail of the fleeing pair. With

keen eyes that could trace as well by moonlight as by day they were never left far behind. "Kill the musician," said the chief to his painted savages, "But bring my daughter back to me." Yet he could not trust the mission to his braves alone. He too must take up the chase.

Up through the dark forests the dim trail led. A few bright beads scattered on the pine mold showed where the frightened Princess had passed. A bit of fur from the musician's robe, caught on a thorn bush, sped the chase. The pursuers spread out among the forests, and Big Chief No Name, like a hound on a sure scent, sped westward toward the highest ridge which overlooked the river canyon, three ferocious savages following at his heels.

At the summit of this ridge, on the edge of its highest cliff, stood the desperate young fugitives. Above their heads the thunder clouds gathered, as though the Great Spirit watched and was angered at this cruel treatment of his children. The bright moon now hid its face behind the dark clouds and the sad grey dawn was struggling to climb up the eastern sky. Lightning streaked through the clouds and a high wind lashed the ridgetop forest.

Fiercer grew the wind till it reached tornado proportions on the high and unprotected point. Then suddenly the Great Spirit reached down through the storm and tore the great trees up by the roots in the fury of His wrath, scattering them along the cliff edges in the wild wet dawning. (They can be seen there to this day, their decaying trunks all lying with roots to the south-west, from which direction the most violent storms usually come.)

The lovers, clasped in each other's arms on the brink of the rugged cliff, looked back where the lightning lit the summit clearing. There they saw the terrible Big Chief bearing down upon them, brandishing his long stone knife, his yelling braves following close behind. One last look, and with cries of despair the two turned and leaped together, out over the ledge, crashing to death on the sharp granite rocks hundreds of feet below.

Big Chief No Name stood very still at the cliff's edge. His stone dagger lay at his feet. His warriors had all slunk away into the shadowed forest where the last rumblings of the storm were growing fainter. The sun sent a first long, tearful ray across the summit as the chief slowly knelt on the red rock ledge to look down over the fatal precipice. What his cold black eyes beheld on the grey rocks below froze his kneeling figure to the spot. His stony heart was suddenly shattered by a thousand arrows of remorse, and when he attempted to rise again he found that the terrible weights of his sorrow-laden form had sunk him completely into the mountaintop. Only his head was left above the surface.

The great face of the chief still remains there, looking down over the canyon of the singing Truckee River. He is doomed to keep watch there until the spirits of his lost daughter and her lover can forgive him, and perhaps return on the wings of some violent future storm to release him from his granite chains.