

Brandeis Madeline

The Little Indian Weaver



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CHAPTER I THE CORN EAR DOLL

How would you like to have a doll made from a corn ear? That is the only kind of doll that Bah ever thought of having. Bah was only five years old and she had never been away from her home, so of course she couldn't know very much.

But she knew a bit about weaving blankets, and she was learning more each day from her mother, who made beautiful ones and sold them.

You see, Bah and her mother were American Indians, and they belonged to the Navajo tribe. Their home was on the Navajo Reservation in Arizona, and they called it an Indian village. But if you went there you would not think it very much of a village in comparison to the villages you know.

As a matter of fact, all you could see was a row of funny little round houses, looking very much like large beehives, put together with mud and sticks and called hogans. A street of hogans in each of which lived a whole family of Indians, a few goats and sheep, a stray dog or two, an Indian woman sitting outside her hogan weaving a blanket, perhaps a child running with a dog – this, then, was a Navajo village.

How different from your villages with their smooth stone buildings, their stores and gasoline stations, and pretty shrub-covered bungalows!

Most Indian women have many babies, and the whole family lives together in one room which is the living room, bedroom, kitchen and dining room all rolled into one. In the top of the hogan is a hole, so that the smoke from the cooking fire in the middle of the room can go out.

Bah did not spend much time in her hogan. No sooner was she up in the morning than she was outside gathering sticks for the breakfast fire. From the time she put her little brown face outside the hogan door, bright and early in the morning, until nightfall when she cuddled down in her warm Navajo blanket, she was out in the air – and the air is so fresh out there in the desert; so much fresher than it is in the big smoky cities.

Bah was a bright-eyed, healthy little girl, and the way she dressed will sound queer to you, for her clothes were made just like her mother's. On rainy days you have no doubt "dressed up" in mother's clothes and thought it quite a lark. But when the game was over, how glad you were to come back to your own little dresses and short socks.

But Bah had always dressed in the same way – and that is, in a long full cotton skirt, a calico waist with long sleeves, and many strings of bright beads about her neck. Her hair was long, black and shiny, and her mother tied it up in a knot at the back of her neck with a white cloth.

Every morning Bah had a lesson in weaving, just as you have a drawing lesson or a sewing lesson. Her father had made her a tiny loom which stood outside the hogan door next to her mother's big loom.

The morning when Bah planned the corn ear doll she was in the midst of her weaving lesson. Mother's fingers were flying in and out, and Bah's fingers were slow – oh, so slow, but her mind was not. Her mind was at work on a doll. She had once seen the picture of a doll, a real one. It was such a lovely doll! She wanted to cuddle it. How she would love to hug a doll close to her and rock it to sleep!

The corn was ripe in the field which was not far away. After the lesson she would pick an ear of corn, dry it nicely and dress it in a wee Indian blanket. She would make some beads for its neck. She would stick in two black beads for eyes. She would —

"Bah! you do not heed the lesson!"

It was Mother. And Mother was scolding. There were few times in Bah's life when she could remember Mother having been cross. Bah was at once attentive.

"I am sorry, Ma Shima (my mother)," she said, in the Navajo language. "I was dreaming of something sweet."

"It is bad medicine to dream when one is awake, Bah," said Mother. "You will never learn to weave – and a Navajo woman who cannot weave blankets is indeed a useless one."

Bah hung her head in shame. But Mother laughed.

"Do not look that way, my little one, but try now to make the little pattern which I teach you."

Bah did try. She had to rip out several rows of bad weaving caused by her dreams of her corn ear doll. But not once, until the lesson was over, did Bah think again of the doll.

The weaving lesson was at last over, and Bah ran quickly to the cornfield, where she began to look eagerly for a proper ear of corn with which to make a proper Indian doll.

As she was looking through the many waving stalks, she thought she heard her name being called. But was it her name, and was it being called? It sounded more like singing than like calling – and Mother did not sing.

"Bah, Bah, Black Sheep
Have you any wool?"

This is what Bah heard.

She stopped in her search and looked around. There, a few yards away, was some one coming towards her on a pony. Bah's first thought was to run. She did not want to meet a stranger. So few came here to her home, where the only people the little girl ever saw were Mother, Father, and the few Indians who lived nearby.

White people were mysterious to Bah, and yet she often wondered about the white children and how they played and worked and what they did all day in school. Bah would go to school next year – to the big new school just built on the Reservation for Indian children. White people built it, and so it must be like the white children's school. Sometimes she longed to go – and other times she was just a little bit afraid.

"Yes, sir, yes, sir,
Three bags full."

The pony which Bah had seen from a distance was now standing beside her, and she could see the rider, although he could not see her, for she had hidden and was crouching between the cornstalks.

The rider was a very small person – a boy – a white boy. Bah really didn't feel as though he should be classified as white, for his skin was a mixture of orange and brown – orange where the sun had burned him, and over that a pattern of vivid brown freckles. Bah had never before seen anything like him, and it is no wonder that the timid little Indian hid herself.

The speckled boy took off his large cowboy hat and wiped his hot brow with a cowboy's handkerchief.

"Gee, it's hot, Peanuts," he said aloud to the pony. "And I'd like to know the way back – but looks as if we're lost."

Peanuts was presumably bored, for he let his head sink slowly, closed his eyes and patiently waited for the next move. None came.

Bah, in her hiding place, was as dumb, if not as bored, as Peanuts. She was tense with excitement, which obviously Peanuts was not, and did not take her eyes from the boy's face. His every

move very much interested her. Here, then, was a white boy. He must be white, for he was not an Indian and he spoke English.

Bah understood English, and of that she was very proud. Her mother and father had always traded with the white man, so they had learned to speak English, and had wisely taught their little girl. Now how much easier it would be for Bah when she started to school.

But her knowledge did not help her at the moment when she looked up from her cornstalk hiding place into the face of a live white boy. Indeed she had even decided to run away, and was crawling noiselessly through the corn.

"Baa, Baa, Black Sheep,"

again the boy began to sing as he started to turn away. Bah stopped crawling. He did sing her name. He wanted her to come back. Maybe she could help him find his way. And Oh! the pony was stepping all over the corn. Didn't he know better than to do that?

The cornstalks rustled. The pony jumped to the side, and the boy turned in his saddle and saw Bah standing.

"Oh, hello!" he said and turned back – the pony trampling upon a beautiful stalk of corn. "I didn't see you before. Where were you?"

Bah couldn't speak. She tried ever so hard, but the English words she knew so well would not come.

The boy jumped down from his pony and went up to her. There was a smile on his face and as he came closer she saw that his eyes were as blue as the sky. That part of him was pretty, thought Bah, even if his skin was not – and the smile was friendly. So she gained courage.

"You call my name?" she ventured.

The boy looked puzzled.

"No," he said, "I don't know your name, but I'm glad I've found you."

Again he smiled, and this time Bah smiled too.

"My name Bah," she said, "and you say 'Bah, Bah, back skip' – I think you call me come back to you."

When it suddenly dawned upon the boy what she meant he opened his mouth very wide indeed and laughed so hard that Bah again began to be afraid. But he stopped suddenly, realizing perhaps that he had frightened her, and said:

"Oh, no. That is a song we sing about 'black sheep' that goes 'bah bah'! I didn't know you heard me singing it."

Bah looked a bit ashamed, and did not offer a reply. The boy kept on talking —

"But, gee, where do you come from, Bah? Is your house around here?"

"Yes," said Bah. "Hogan over way, Bah come to find corn in cornfield."

"Oh, I see," said the boy, "for dinner, I guess."

"No," replied the Indian girl, looking up into his face, "Bah make so pretty doll from corn ear. Will dress in blanket and beads. You ever see little girl's doll?"

She looked so intent and innocent that the boy could not scoff at what would have been, among members of his own group at home, a subject entirely forbidden in the presence of growing gentlemen. Dolls! What interest had he in dolls! But as he looked into the upturned face of the little brown maiden, he suddenly realized that she had never heard of a boy's dislike for dolls; in fact, she had probably never before met a white boy nor seen a white doll.

"Oh, yes, plenty of 'em," answered the white boy, "but never made of an ear of corn – "

Then, seeing a shadow pass over her face he resumed gallantly, "But it ought to make a peach of a doll. Maybe I could help you make it."

Now Bah was certain that she would like the white boy. She had never before had a human playmate, and the feeling was a pleasant one. But she remembered that her new friend was lost.

"You no can find way home?" she asked.

The boy laughed.

"I guess you want to get rid of me," he said. Then, sobering, he resumed. "Yes, really, I'm lost. Peanuts and I have been wandering all morning. You see, we started from Tuba early and we just didn't watch the trails, so here we are."

"Oh, Tuba," said Bah, "not so very far. I show you how to go."

"But first I'll help you fix up a corn doll," said the boy. "We'll first have to find a good fat corn ear. Nice fat dolls are the best, don't you think so?"

As he talked he began looking through the cornstalks, and Bah watched him. He finally found what he considered to be an ideal ear, and together the two children made it into a doll, black bead eyes, cornsilk hair, blanket, and all.

"I have just the name for her," said the boy. "We'll call her 'Cornelia!' Shall we?"

Bah nodded happily. The name was a new one to her and she did not catch its meaning in relation to her beautiful new doll, but it pleased her nevertheless. In fact, everything about the boy pleased her, and she was sorry when at last he said:

"It must be getting late. You'd better tell me how to get home. Mother will wonder what happened."

Bah pointed out directions and the boy, thanking her, held out his hand and said: "You never even asked my name. Don't you want to know?"

Bah drooped her head shyly as she replied: "Indian never ask name. Very bad manner."

The white boy's eyes opened wide.

"That's funny," he said. "Then how do you get to know people's names?"

"When one people like other people, they tell name. No ask," said Bah seriously.

"Oh, then I'll tell you quick 'cause I like you. My name's Billy."

Bah did not reply, but stood watching Billy as he swung himself onto his pony. Then, when he was seated and smiled down at her, she smiled up sweetly and said:

"We have cow named Billy."

CHAPTER II

SOMETHING TERRIBLE HAPPENS

For days Bah's chief delight was her new corn ear doll. She kept it with her constantly. It went to bed with her, sat at meals with her, and watched the daily weaving lesson.

But one day a terrible thing happened. She was sitting by her mother's side outside the hogan, her little fingers flying through the strings of her loom, and one eye watching Mother's more experienced fingers as they made a beautiful new pattern.

Cornelia had been carefully dressed in her blanket, her beads hung about her neck and fondly kissed by her devoted parent, and was now lying at Bah's feet while the little girl worked hard at her lesson.

"Pull your wool tighter, Bah," said Mother, in Navajo.

Bah's fingers and tongue worked together. Children's tongues have a habit of moving with whatever else is in motion.

And as Bah worked, some sheep came wandering in from the field. They were tame sheep and often nosed about the hogan for a bit of human company or food, as the case might be, and this morning I fear the reason was food.

Father sheep was very large and therefore hungrier than the rest. His hunger made him bold. But Bah was a particular friend of his, and I doubt whether even his appetite could have driven him to do what he did that morning, had he been able to guess the great sorrow he was to cause.

"You have left out a stitch, my child, and there will be a hole in the work."

Bah's fingers stopped and so did her tongue.

"Oh dear, must I do that all over again, Mother?" she asked.

"If you wish to weave perfectly so that you may some day sell your work, then you must learn to rip and go over many times."

Ripping is deadly work, as everyone who has ever ripped knows. And Bah was not as interested in ripping as she had been in making her pattern. So her thoughts naturally turned to her precious Cornelia lying at her feet.

Her eyes turned at the same time, and horror upon horrors, what did she see? The big black sheep was there chewing contentedly, but Cornelia was gone. The little blanket was there – so were the beads and some of the cornsilk hair. But Cornelia was gone. The sheep went on chewing and couldn't understand why Bah did not caress him as usual.

"Bah, do pay attention to your work!"

Mother was annoyed. Bah turned around and Mother saw a very sad sight. She saw before her another mother – a stricken little mother whose child had just provided a meal for a hungry animal. She rocked an empty blanket back and forth, and the tears were beginning to gather. Mother understood what had happened, and now her voice sounded soft and kind.

"Poor Bah! Your doll is gone!"

The little girl was crying as she continued to hug the empty blanket.

"Do not cry, my little one," said Mother. "Are there not many more corn ears in the field?"

"Yes, my Mother," sobbed the child, "but no more Cornelias!"

And that was final. Never again could Bah go back to the cornfield. Never again! How could Mother even have suggested such a thing! Didn't she know that Cornelia, since the day of her birth, had been different from all other ears of corn?

Why, Cornelia was a doll – she and Billy had decided that – and the rest were vegetables! Oh, didn't Mother understand? Perhaps Mother did, for her next remark showed it.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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