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**BAH-HÊ
AND THE
SHAMAN**

By
Von Ogden Vogt

Bah-hê and the Shaman

The story of a Navajo rite
between sunset and dawn

By Von Ogden Vogt

LITERATURE DEPARTMENT
PRESBYTERIAN HOME MISSIONS
156 FIFTH AVENUE, NEW YORK



BAH-HÊ

¶ This picture of Bah-hê was taken before her illness. Notice the velvet jacket with silver buttons, the silver bracelet and the strands of beads as well as the tiny lamb. If the camera had caught her smiling, you would be struck with the beauty of the countenance. Even in this picture the regularity of feature is well displayed.

¶ The Navajo gives us about the last chance to do the right thing by the Indian.

There are 28,000 people in the tribe and the number is increasing.

They are lithe, sturdy, proud and independent, little affected by contact with white people.

They are humorous, industrious, self-supporting and pagan.

They rove over a desert plateau of 16,000 square miles.

They raise sheep and goats, grow a little corn and make blankets and silverware.

¶ The Presbyterian church has the most extensive work for them, one school, and a missionary at each of three other places. The following are the needs now:—

First, a medical mission. The government provides physicians at the agencies and schools only. Thousands of scattered shepherds and their families have absolutely no medical care. A hospital is proposed.

Second, a mission school is essential for at least one other station. There are about 6,000 children with no school opportunity.

Third, a new house for the missionary at Fort Defiance.

Fourth, smaller items, such as wagons and hospital equipment.

Fifth, consecrated volunteers for a life service amongst this fascinating people.

¶ Sunday schools should provide these things. Arrange the contributions as soon as possible.

PRESBYTERIAN HOME MISSIONS

Address: YOUNG PEOPLE'S DEPARTMENT

156 Fifth Avenue, New York City

It reads like fiction, but the charm of it—the horror of it—is that it is true. It is the tale of what actually transpired only the other day, not in the dim ages before medical and other scientific sanity and Christ and wholesome living and brotherly love were heard of. Mr. Vogt saw and heard with his own eyes and ears. There is, perhaps, cause to lament the passing of some of the romantic, guilelessly simple features of the Indian life. But there can be no lamenting the abolition of such features as this. Superstition is often not simply picturesque; this is horrible, and the sooner these "medicine man's" atrocities are supplanted by a Christian humanity the sooner will a Christian nation and a Christian church demonstrate their faithfulness. J. E. M.

No. 289. 1st Ed., 1, '08

Price, 5c. per copy; \$4.50 per hundred

BAH-HÊ AND THE SHAMAN

I.



BEFORE I tell you of the night of August seventeenth, you should know that Bah-hê was made in a very fine mould—and also you should know about the night of August sixteenth.

Bah-hê was born in a land of lights. About her father's hogan were hills of yellow and wine and the shade of green old cedars, twisted and torn half bare of bark. Through a break in the table-land, she could see long cliffs, the day's first sun lit up as white and shining as the walls the saint saw from Patmos. When she led the goats and sheep over a ridge to the west, the sweep of land was wide and far. It reached away to the black bulk of Zilh le jini. Lonely in the north a flat rock raised its head above the desert floor, almost a hundred miles away.

Once Don Lorenzo, trader among the Navajos for many years, says she is the most faithful shepherd child on the reservation.

Once she is ambitious to go to school. Her sister Yashie and two others are ready to go. Bah-hê is crying and wants to go. Her mother cannot spare her but she shall have her chance.

Once the chance for school comes. Her mother urges her to go. The uncles are persuaded. They leave the decision with Bah-hê. Her mother is not well and the other children are little.

“No, I cannot leave her this winter.”

Her mother's death leaves her the care of small brothers and sisters. Even so, the hope of school is not gone. Again she decides against it. Her uncle has done so much. He needs to be away. She cannot leave the care of his sheep.

Once her voice is low and earnest as she gives counsel to her sister Yashie. Yashie is returning to school. She must study and get all she can. Her sister wanted the chance and it did not come. Yashie must not waste her time nor be foolish. It is a great opportunity.

Once with a bad throat she comes wading through the snow of March, scarce able to speak or eat. The missionaries try to keep her in their home.

"No, I must not stay. Nobody else knows where all the little goats belong."

She comes to be a grown woman, straight, slender and well formed. Indeed, she is beautiful. The cheek rises closer to the eye than in the white woman's face, but the skin is smooth and clear and the nose small. The eyes are large and reserved. They seem to reveal that she knows the disadvantage of her race, and at the same time display such self-respect and dignity as mark only the personalities of the strong. She lives happily the young wife of Kei, son of Donetzosi's wife.

II.

The night of August sixteenth was unpleasant. The clouds of afternoon had failed to develop into rain. Across the night sky they were stretched in dull films that half obscured a low moon. After some miles through a dark valley, we followed

a rising trail to the sage-brush plain of a mesa top, the missionary, the Indian youth Joe and I. A few rods on, between the second man and the third, came the hissing sound of a rattlesnake. He was killed in the dark before we passed on. Soon, over a low ridge, the sharp light of a camp fire appeared, together with the night noises of impatient sheep and goats in a little corral.

Beyond the corral and beyond the summer shelter of cedar and piñon boughs is the hogan of a Navajo family. Several strong logs with great notches form the framework of the circular hut. Other timbers, from three to six inches through, serve as the slanting wall and roof. Thick layers of mud are plastered over the exterior.

Without stopping at the shelter, we enter the low doorway.

A fire lights the blackened timbers above and the circle of dark faces about. To the left are boys and men, to the right little children and women, women old and women young. Across the fire the old shaman or Indian medicine man leads in a wailing song.

A little cry with a movement of the women and I see where the sufferer lies. Three women try to hold her quiet. The beginnings of St. Vitus dance have come only within the week. Higher and higher rise the noisy notes of the singing men. Even the little boys have joined in now. When the sound falls again it is because three or four men have stopped to smoke. Twenty-two persons breathe in the little space and the camp fire smokes and the singers smoke. Stretching out beyond the edge of the sheepskin where she lies, the naked feet of the sick one twitch and turn in the dust of the earthen floor. It is Bah-hê.

I do not know how long it was but it seemed hours before the horrid noise ceased. The stifling air remained. The missionary rose and motioned the father of the girl. Outside by the corral, he turned about with a sharp tone:

“Danitda, sit down.”

Then to Joe:

“Ask him why he doesn't kill his daughter outright instead of by slow degrees.”

Slowly and softly, Joe repeats in the smooth words of Navajo.

“Why do you hold this ‘singing,’ when she is getting worse rather than better, when you promised not to hold another? Animals, such as sheep and cows, have more care for the safety of their young. But here you are singing over your own child and singing her straight to the grave.

“You know as well as I that when she was sick before she went to the hospital and was cured, and yet you will not send her again.

“A dog will be afraid when her young are touched, but when she sees they are helped she will lick the hand of her friends in gratitude. We have helped your daughter before, but now you will not listen to our words. She grows worse day by day. Twelve days ago she could talk to us and walk about; now three women must hold her down.

“In these twelve days you have had three medicine men to sing over her and still she grows worse. How long is this to last? Yashie her sister wants her to go to the hospital. Others want her to go.

You are the one keeping her back. Why not take her to-morrow? I will go myself if you cannot."

The steady voice stopped speaking. In the silence I heard twice the cries of the girl in the hogan. The air was chilly. With my back to the three seated figures I stood looking at the sickly moon and the streaky clouds. Yashie stood beside me crying. Then the missionary's strong voice:

"What does he say?"

Joe asks for the answer. At length the father speaks a few hurried words. Impassively Joe repeats:

"Well, he says that this shaman is singing. He came here three days ago and she is not so bad."

"You know that is not so. Ten days ago she could walk and here she is helpless to-night."

The father is obstinate.

"Well, wait until this singing is over and she may be better."

"All right, go ahead and you will sing her to her grave. If a white man were to do such a thing as your treatment of your daughter, he would be put in a jail.

“ I know I am speaking hard words. I have never said such hard things to any Indian, but I am trying to make you realize what you are doing.”

But the heathen father only rises and enters the hogan.

Within Bah-hê is sitting up. Heated and tormented by the smoke and the noise and the close presence of so many breathing bodies, she tries to shake off the blanket that is the only covering for her shoulders. From the dark corners beyond their elders, with eyes wide and shining, the little children stare at her heaving frame and the old medicine man and the circle of men smoking. The picture of the awesome rite is burning its way through those child eyes to stay while memory stays.

Without, the missionary tries to persuade other women and a young man. No, the shaman must cure her. She has seen a mad coyote and this is the cause of her sickness.

The missionary enters again and the medicine man begins talking. Joe repeats his statement that if they did send her to the hospital there would be no one there

to care for her. At once comes the clear voice:

“Were you ever there? No. Then why do you make such statements, when you know nothing about it? Here are people now who have been there and been cured. They were fed and warmed and a nurse sat by them the whole night.”

Then again, patiently but firmly, the missionary turns to the people and explains that he could not be present and hear such false statements without calling them untrue.

An uncle of the girl feels driven to take up the case. He explains the slow nature of all cures, whether worked by Indian medicine men or white people, talking at length in trying to press his point.

But the missionary is prompt and tactful again.

“Slivers, you know that you yourself two months ago advised that she be taken to the hospital. I was glad to hear that. If they had listened to your words then she would be well now.”

Then enthusiastically he tries to persuade the uncle to give his consent if the others will give theirs. The uncle only

throws the case back on the father. Again the father is besought. Again the father puts him off.

"I do not know how to think, I am so distressed by the words you spoke outside. Many Horses said it would be all right to have this singing."

"Well," said the missionary, "tell him he is a man, he is no boy. Why doesn't he reason for himself and decide?"

So the struggle went, one strong man against other strong men. But neither by tact nor severity could anything be won except a promise to talk it over and send a later word.

III.

Saturday night, August seventeenth, I rode again to the hogan under the guidance of one of the uncles, arriving shortly after sunset. The family and relatives were just entering for the ceremonies of the fifth successive night. Bah-hê seemed to be resting more comfortably. There was much joking and laughter about the circle around the fire. The company was about

to "sing" as on the previous night. All these people were crowded as before in the small space, at its greatest length not more than five paces.

It took some half hour for two young men, under the medicine man's direction, to whittle smooth two green sticks of wood. The smaller piece of wood was bound with a sinew thong to the end of a long smooth stick. As the singing began four small piles of cedar bark, shredded and dried, were placed in the central space. As the singing rose, a young man rolled rapidly between his hands the long stick, the end of which played in a notch of the other piece of green wood. At length the sticks began to smoke and the spark came. By careful blowing the first pile of cedar bark was lighted to a fire. Slowly, one after another, the four piles were lighted, by the patient efforts of the young man.

The hands of the young man who rolled the stick were blistered.

While the fires were being lighted and the singing became sharper and more shrill, Bah-hê was brought to the space between the fires. All her clothing was removed except a single skirt. With bared

shoulders shaking, she still held fast the instinctive shield of folded arms. The smoke became almost unendurable. Five fires were burning besides the smoke of tobacco. I could not see across the space. My eyes stung and the tears ran in great drops down my face, although I was sitting immediately beside the opening to the outer air. The sufferer was immediately between the fires.

While the fires burned down, still the noise continued. When finally the whole substance of each pile, one by one, had been consumed to ashes, a woman rose, gathered the black ashes of the first pile and conveyed them to the sacred basket the shaman held in his hands. In the basket this black mass was mixed with water, amidst the long-drawn intonations of the singers. In the same way all of the four piles of ashes were used to prepare the black substance, half paste and half liquid.

Then two women proceeded with the baskets to the sick girl as she sat, now tossing her arms about, well nigh suffocated and tormented beyond endurance.

Beginning with her feet — while the song reached into cries and shrieks — they

painted her whole body until every spot was covered, black as coal, save the white of her shifting eyes.

Then, one by one, all the women in the hogan smeared their feet and hands and faces. The little girls, down to the smallest that could walk, followed in line after their mothers. The oldest woman—she was a great-grandmother, wrinkled and bent—painted more of her body than any of the others. With other incantations, the grim old shaman sprinkled a pinch of his herbs from a basket over various portions of the invalid's body. Then with their fingers, while the song kept moving, several persons brushed red coals from the fire to a half dozen spots in the room, so that all might be in reach to wave with their hands a stream of the curling smoke over their faces. Various passes of the hands and mutterings followed, while the old man prepared a drink in the bowl of a gourd. He walked across the little space, brown hips exposed by the curious cut of his garments, his lower legs bare, and administered the drink to Bah-hê, with a faster final movement of the nasal song.

The ceremony was over.

They wrapped the girl in blankets and gave her to the care of the women. But far into the night the exciting noise continued. Women brought in steaming coffee and piles of bread. Over the feast there was laughter, joking and smoking, first of the men and then of the women. When quiet came at last, they unrolled a big sheepskin for me by the others around the fire. Once, in the midst of a little sleep, I saw that Bah-hê was trying to rise and the women trying to keep her still. She could not win quiet for her heated brain. I roused up with the first gray and left the dark place just as a woman moved to stir the fire.

As I crossed the sage-brush mesa the sun rose. The clouds about the morning were not red, nor purple, nor gold, but silver white. It was Sunday morning and the far desert hills were flooded with light. Any but a stone man had prayed the Lord of that day to bring her His peace, and to the minds and hearts of her people, His light.

THE WOLFER PRESS
NEW YORK