

THE ANCIENT ONE

By

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“Hit it!” one of the players yelled, as Songbird gripped a curved stick and swatted a deerskin ball. The boys went after it and one of the players drove the ball in another direction. Shinny was a favorite game where there was no goal or score. It was played just for fun.

Songbird, a quiet Indian boy with great inner strength, was 10 seasons old and growing tall. His grandfather, a powerful spiritual leader of the tribe, called a Cacique, was teaching him the ancient religion of his people.

Before playing shinny with the boys, he had helped his father water the family cornfield. All the stalks were small and shriveled from the long drought.

The tribal elders were trying to decide if they should move out of the area. The irrigation ditches and small dams were almost dry, and the creek was down to a mere trickle.

After a busy morning of working and playing, Songbird went to rest at a hideaway near the bank of the creek. Strapped across his shoulder was a long wooden flute his grandfather had carved for him,

which was his favorite possession. Removing it, he began playing solitary songs under the shade of a lone pinion tree.

To Songbird's surprise, a boy about his age appeared out of nowhere, also with a wooden flute.

"Who are you?" Songbird asked the boy, whom he had never seen.

"I've been hearing you play the flute," answered the boy, "and I like your songs. Would you like to hear me play?"

"Yes, I would," responded Songbird.

Lifting the flute to his lips, the mysterious boy played a haunting melody that Songbird had never heard.

"That's beautiful," said Songbird. "Can you teach it to me?"

"I'd be happy too," answered the boy.

After learning the song that gave him an inner glow, Songbird asked, "Where do you live?"

"I live in the cliffs," he answered, as he pointed across the creek. "Come and meet my family."

Songbird was caught by surprise! His father had told him the cliff dwellings had been abandoned for as long as the Indians could remember. His tribe had stayed away from there out of superstition and respect to the "Ancient Ones," who they believed had lived there at one time.

Arriving at the base of a cliff they climbed a ladder to one of the dwellings. He was amazed to see a great number of people living there. The boy introduced him to his family and they invited him to stay for a while. Songbird talked about the drought, and said the elders of his tribe thought they might have to leave.

“Your people don’t have to move,” said the boy’s father. “We’ll show you a ‘rain dance’ that will bring you much needed rain.” Preparing for the dance, his son placed a sacred Kachina mask over his face, which he said had been used by their ancestral spirits. To the beat of a drum, the father and son got up and began their special dance for Songbird, then asked him to join the group. The instant he started dancing, Songbird felt a powerful force surround him.

After the dance and as they were leaving the dwelling, the boy handed Songbird his Kachina mask. “The spirits are with you,” he said, “and they would want you to have this mask.” Songbird accepted the gift with great honor.

He was anxious to get home to show his grandfather his new Kachina mask and demonstrate the rain dance. As they neared the creek, his new friend stopped and bid him goodbye. After a few steps, Songbird turned to wave, but the boy had mysteriously disappeared.

When he reached the top of a mesa where he lived with his tribe, Songbird interrupted a meeting of the elders who were about to make an important decision on leaving the area. He excitedly told them about the rain dance he’d been taught by the cliff dwellers.

“Your grandson is dizzy from blowing his flute too much,” one of the men said to Songbird’s grandfather, as the other men laughed.

“Let me play the boy’s song,” pleaded Songbird, “and you’ll feel its power.”

“I can see no harm in letting the boy play,” said his grandfather. With a nod from him Songbird brought his flute up, and began playing the strange but haunting melody that little by little captured the men’s attention.

When he finished, his grandfather the Cacique recognized the effect of the melody on all those gathered. He looked at them and said reverently, "Songbird has played a song handed down from the spirits. I think it would be wise to let him do his rain dance for us." The other men nodded their heads in silent agreement.

When they went outside, it was a cloudless sun-drenched day as the grandfather and elders formed a ceremonial circle around Songbird to witness the dance. Curious as to what was going on, the other members of the tribe quickly joined the elders.

Songbird took the Kachina mask from his belt and placed it over his face. He slowly started performing the new dance that he'd learned. A couple of the elders were still laughing thinking the boy was crazy. But when a soft breeze began blowing and the sky darkened, they stopped. A young man walked to his drum and started playing a pulsating beat, as others got up and solemnly joined in the dance.

Raindrops began to fall, getting heavier and heavier until a downpour erupted. The remainder of the men including the elders happily joined in the dance, while the women collected the falling rain in jugs. When their dam filled and the creek became a river the rain came to a halt.

With the end of the drought, the grandfather realized Songbird had been with the ancient people, and they had chosen him to be a great spiritual leader.

The Cacique stepped forward and a hush fell over them. He said in a quiet voice, "Songbird will no longer be called by his old name. Since he has been given great powers by the spirits, from this day forward, he'll be known as--The Ancient One."