

MOTHER CORN

(Lenape)

Long ago, the Corn Spirit, whom we call Kahesana Xaskwim, Mother Corn, left the Earth. She was angry because some young men said that they did not believe she existed and that the people could never lose their corn seed. So it was that all the corn seeds took flight as if they had wings like little bugs. Everyone's corn was disappearing like this, and soon almost none was to be found anywhere. One man was determined that his wife's seed corn would never get away, so he put it in a deer-skin bag and kept it under his head while he slept; but it too flew away in the form of bugs when the bag was opened.

Now, the corn being gone, people were quarreling and treating each other badly due to a lack of food and all the worries about the coming winter. Finally the winter came and a deep snow fell which covered even the trees. When the Chiefs saw this they said, "The Creator has sent this to punish us," and they cried and grieved for their people so, that the Creator had pity on them and sent a south wind, which melted the snow away.

One day an old man came from the south who said, "The Creator has sent me to help you through your troubles from the snow. Now, my grandchildren, I will give you this thing," presenting them with a sisawin, an oyster, "to put on top of your pipe and to give sustenance to your little children. Strike the ice with your pipe and you will be given plenty to eat." So, they fastened the oyster to their pipe and went and struck the ice with it. Every time they did this an oyster would appear on their pipe. They made a bag to put them in and soon had filled it with oysters and carried them to their village, where they emptied them to a special house, hanging them up to dry. It wasn't long before they had enough to supply the village for some time.

In the morning the old man took a young boy by the hand and told him, "Come let us go to the middle of the sea and find the Corn Woman. I have come from the Spirit World, to instruct and assist your people." Then away they both went to the sea. After traveling some time on the ice, they came to a hole and the old man took the child by the hand and went down into it. When they got through there was not water, but they saw land all around. The land appeared to be a corn field, but no corn remained.

Off in the distance they saw a house. The old man said, "That must be the home of the Corn Woman. We shall visit her, but first we shall eat." So they took some oysters out of the old man's pouch and roasted them over a fire. After a while the oysters opened up as they cooked, and a woman came from the house to their fire. The woman asked the man if he would give her some of their food as she was so very hungry and it smelled so good and sweet. So he gave her some of the oysters, saying, "Are you the Corn Woman who is called Khesana Xaskwim, Mother Corn, in the land up above?" "Yes I am Mother Corn, old man. Why do you ask?" said she. The old man said, "I have come to ask you for some seed corn, to bring it back upon the Earth, for the people are hungry and suffering. I gave some people a medicine to get oysters, but a person can get tired of oysters if that's all there is to eat!" Then the old man said, "Now that we have eaten, we will offer tobacco in thanks to the Creator for this gift of food. Also, we would like to sing and dance for you, Corn Woman!"

So, the old man sang and the young boy danced, and Mother Corn was well pleased with the oysters and the singing and the dancing that her sorrow disappeared, as if a great weight had been lifted from her heart. "But why should I let the corn be brought back to the Earth among those who are not thankful for my gift of corn and who take me for granted?" asked the Corn Woman. The little boy pleaded with her, crying, "The people of my village would be very thankful if you would give us some corn to take back to them. Many of the people on the Earth are starving, many of them small children such as myself." Mother Corn could not resist the pain of so small a child and her heart went out to him.

In the meantime, the old man made her some earrings out of the oyster shells. Corn Woman was touched by this gift. She put them in her ears, and they looked so lovely, she was happy and she cried. But it was not tears which flowed from her eyes when she cried. It was corn seed! Corn Woman said, "From this I will give you each a handful of seed corn to take back with you, and I will teach you special songs and dances. When I hear these songs being sung and see the dances being danced, it will make me very happy. I will know that you are very thankful and I will give you an abundance of corn and crops so that the people won't hunger." The old man and the boy each received a handful of corn seed, gave Corn Woman much thanks and back they went to the land above.

When they came out of the hole in the ice, the old man took the child by the hand and traveled on very fast, as the ice and snow were melting fast away. When they got to the village, the old man said, "Be thankful and glad that we have returned. The corn that has been so long lost is now returned to you. It appeared to me as a woman and she said that you will all be well. She gave us these two handfuls of seed corn which I now give to you." When the people heard this, they were overjoyed! From those two handfuls of seed corn came all of the corn that we have now.

The next day some people digging in the snow found a great many wild potatoes, and the woods abounded in deer and game. The Spirit Woman had spoken true! The people were very happy in finding such an unexpected abundance of food, and said, "We will now make an offering to our Mother Corn who has given these gifts to us!" So they offered her tobacco. They sang the songs and danced the dances she had taught the old man and the boy. The women went and planted the seed corn, and the corn that they harvested was four times as large as usual!

After the corn ceremony in honor of Mother Corn, the old man told the people that it was their duty to hold such ceremonies in thanks for the many gifts given to them by the Creator. He told them that the hard times they had just experienced were a punishment for the wrongs they did to each other, and for their lack of faith and thankfulness, and that from this experience he hoped they would learn to be humble, to realize the dependence that they had on all things for their very existence. It is not wise to take the corn and such gifts for granted.

So, we should always thank Mother Corn for a bountiful harvest, and pray that we have one just as good next year, and that we will all enjoy good health. Mother Corn, the Corn Woman, since that time long ago has been held to be very close and dear to our Lenape People.