

The Indian Suit

by M.B.

"ACTUALLY," I plead, "he wants a Hornby." "Huh!" sneers my husband.

I agree. What with Account Rendered from Christmas cutting off one's retreat and Rates and Income Tax lowering ahead, February's child is lucky if he gets an all-day sucker for his birthday.

"He was quite keen on having an Indian suit like Timmy's," I volunteer reluctantly.

"Splendid!" agrees my husband. "There's those old sugar-bags in the basement and some feathers from the hen-run and a little bit of wool fringe or something—he'll be tickled pink!"

"Huh," I enthuse, putting my novel on the mantelpiece and preparing for an evening of picking oakum.

"GEE, Mum, it's grouse. Can I wear it to school?"

"No, dear, I hardly think so."

"Then I aren't going to school."

"Yes, I think you are."

"Big Chief Sitting Bull didn't have to go to school."

"Yes, he did. When he was six he did."

"Did he wear his proper clothes or did he wear silly old shirt and pants?"

"I suppose he wore his proper clothes."

"Then I'm going to."

"You'll be far too hot."

"Was Sitting Bull far too hot?"

"Yes, of course he was. He was very uncomfortable."

"Indian braves didn't mind being uncomfortable. They put up with things."

"For heaven's sake hurry! There's the bus going down!"

"I'll leave the hat so you can wear it if you want to."

"Thanks. Come back! You've forgotten your lunch!"

"Gee, Mum, it's a good hat, it's got far more feathers than Tim's. Give it me quick, I want to show the kids!"

After all, I reflect, it isn't as if they had a School Uniform.

THE next day is Saturday, and we're going to the zoo after lunch to celebrate Jimmy's birthday.

"And I might as well tell you now," I say to him, sternly at the lunch-table, "that you'll be wearing your white shirt and your grey pants."

There is a shriek of anguished protest from Jimmy, and he bursts into noisy sobs.

"Garn," says George unkindly, "Big Chief Walla Walla Cats Meat doesn't cry."

"I'm not Cats Meat, I'm Sitting Bull."

"Behold mighty brave blub in front of squaws," continues George, rubbing it in.

"We're not squaws, we're sheilas," protests Susan, performing a tactful drawing-off manoeuvre.

"For goodness sake hurry!" I pro-

test, "or we won't have time to go anywhere. Jimmy, stop crying and eat up your dinner. Big Chief Sitting Bull always ate up his dinner."

"Did his mother make him eat Irish stew?"

"I don't know."

"What did she make him eat?"

"I don't know. Probably buffalo steaks and corn bread."

"Then why don't you let me eat buffalo steaks and corn bread?"

"Because I haven't got any."

"You are silly."

"That settles it. You can't go."

More wails from Jimmy. Susan creates a diversion.

"Did you like sleeping in your Indian suit last night, Jimmy?"

"It was good. I scratched and scratched, but in the morning I woke up and I was all dressed. Wasn't that sensible?"

"Perhaps Mummy will let you take your bow and arrow to the zoo and you can shoot bears."

"Susan!" I shriek. "Now, Jimmy, do as you're told and don't argue. Big Chief Sitting Bull wouldn't have argued when his mother told him to do something."

"Wouldn't he just!" gloats George.

"Actually American Indians had a very low opinion of sheilas—they just sat and smoked their pipes and let them do all the work around the place. And quite right, too."

"That's enough from you, George. Take those plates out."

"Yes, Mum."

"AND you and George have been so good and helpful today that if you like you can put the tent up and sleep outside like real Indians."

"Yippee! And can we have your fur coat to sleep on?"

"Certainly not."

"But Indians always slept on furs—it says so in that book about Deerfoot you got me from the library. Why can't we?"

"Because I say not."

"We wouldn't get it dirty, would we, George?"

"That's enough. I say No."

Jimmy opens his mouth and screams.

"Actually," George shouts to me across the sound barrier, "it must have been rather nice living in an Indian village where everybody just said Huh or Ugh when they were spoken to."

"What if people wouldn't let them do things?" asks Jimmy, recovering.

"They just said 'Ugh'."

"Huh," says Jimmy.

"You see," explains George kindly, "they wouldn't give people the satisfaction of thinking they'd hurt them."

"Huh," says Jimmy, impressed.

"FOR goodness sake, Jimmy," I shrill, "I thought you were going to practise being impassive. What is it this time?"

Shrieks of extreme outrage are coming from the bottom of the garden, so convincingly anguished that I actually find myself hurrying.

But for once it isn't Jimmy, it's little Mary. Jimmy has punched her, hard.

I go in search of Jimmy, who has taken to the bush on my approach. (It was probably easier for Deerfoot to elude pursuit, with several hundred acres to hide in.) I drag him down from it and hale him into the house to be confronted by his accuser.

"It's her fault—she took my arrow."

"I didn't know it was his silly old arrow—I wanted it for a wand for my Fairy Doll!"

I eye the culprit sternly, and the spirit of my military forbears stirs strongly in me.

"Son, you are a disgrace to the uniform you wear. Take it off!"

"Uh?" says Jimmy.

"To hit a little girl!" (I am tempted to add that Deerfoot would never have done it, but catch George's quizzical eye and desist.) "For punishment I'm going to take away your Indian Suit and not let you have it back till you've learnt to behave like a civilised person instead of a little savage!"

Jimmy's howls hit the ceiling.

George attempts comfort. "Never mind, Jimmy," he says, "If you'd been a real Indian you could have been punished a lot worse."

"How?" I ask, professionally interested.

"Didn't you see *The Paleface*?" asks George. "There were some grouse ideas in that. You get two saplings and you bend them over and tie them to the ground, and then you get somebody and—"

"That's enough!" I quench. Jimmy is looking a little too interested. Fortunately, there's nothing very suitable at

the bottom of the Botthamley garden—even the Indian corn grows only waist-high.

The tears are drying on Jimmy's face and inspiration replaces desolation.

"Mary, hi, Mary!" he calls.

She comes like a homing pigeon, delighted to be forgiven for squealing.

Surely he wouldn't—not little Mary!

The two heads are put together. There are giggles, positive yelps of delighted anticipation. Then Mary runs into the house and returns with the Fairy Doll. Hand in hand they go down to the bottom of the garden.

"OUCH, ouch, ouch!" yells Jimmy.

"Ooh, look, it's bleeding. Get some plaster, quick!"

Will it jelly? I tilt the saucer. The liquid flows with joyous lack of inhibition from one side to the other. But there's a slight smell of burning. Maybe it's caught on the bottom. To bottle or not to bottle?

"Help! It's hurting me! Get a bandage! Put some red stuff on!"

Exasperated, I turn. "—making a fuss about a teeny-weeny scratch! And you're supposed to be an Indian! Indians are brave. They don't cry. They don't go running to their mothers when they see a drop of blood."

"I'm not an Indian! I hate being an Indian! Mad old Indians: Mad old Indian suit!"

There's a sound of rending (I'm not a very good sewer) and the Indian suit is on the floor, with Jimmy doing a war dance on top of it. I attempt a punitive expedition, but I am anchored to the preserving pan. A door slams. He is gone.

"Come back!" I shriek. "Come back and put it away this minute! Big Chief Sitting Bull wouldn't leave his clothes in the middle of the wigwam for his mother to pick up!"

But a dreadful doubt assails me. Perhaps George is right—perhaps he would.

With slow squaw-like resignation I pick up the Indian suit and put it on the mending pile. That's one job I needn't hurry over—it probably won't be needed again. There is a faint smell of burning jam.



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