

A Little Devotee to Magic

(By Bertha Lewis)

Evening was falling damply over the Indian settlement at Nameless Bay. The cannery by the water's edge was shadowy in the early spring mist just turning to a drizzle; the squeal of a belated sea-gull and the soft lap, lap of the incoming tide, the only sounds to break the stillness; the only sign of life, a dim glimmer of light from a cottage window.

Busily sorting out materials for new baskets, sat Oyapella, little Singing Water, the handsome sixteen-year-old half-breed Indian girl affectionately known in the settlement at Pella. The general room of the little log house was scantily furnished but very clean. A few Indian baskets hung upon the walls, a few bright faces from magazine covers added life and color, a bright red tam and scarf hung upon a peg behind the door, a sulky wood fire smouldered on stones beneath the wide chimney, and one corner was curtained off with bright chintz, evidently the sleeping quarters judging by the sound of heavy breathing which proclaimed Pella's mother to be very fast asleep.

Three little taps on the door and a cautious rattling of the latch, brought Pella bounding from her stool. Opening the door a very little way, she whispered anxiously, "Whatever are you doing, Joey? Why are you out on such a night as this?"

Ten-year-old Joey was quite excited. "Put on yer things, Pella, and come on quick. Mrs. Wilson's gone down the path to Kloochie's. Come on; it's all right, I got the charm yer gave me on my birthday."

Pella had little liking for a scouting expedition, but her curiosity was aroused to find anyone abroad on a night when most people preferred to be within doors, and even the dogs huddled in sheltered corners for protection against the penetrating drizzle.

"There she is," excitedly exclaimed Joey, as they started off in pursuit, the wet wind whipping their faces.

Turning off along a path that led directly away from the larger group of dwellings and towards a hut seemingly an outcast,—it was so lonely, tumble-down and bare of any human touch,—they spied Lotta Wilson, the much disliked and distrusted wife of their adored school-teacher. She pushed through the fringe of bushes about this hut which was occupied by an old kloochman of incredible antiquity and dirt. After repeatedly knocking and calling her by name, Lotta persuaded the old woman to open

the door. Grudgingly she did so just enough to let Lotta squeeze through. She found herself to be in a room lighted weirdly only by the logs that sputtered and flared on a rubble hearth. As she seated herself opposite the old Indian, at a rude table, she began to wish she had not come.

"You make bad medicine, Kloochman?"

"Maybe—maybe no."

"You make very bad medicine," said Lotta, eagerly, placing a silver dollar on the table.

"Maybe—maybe no—who want?"

Lotta leaned forward, her lips trembling as she tensely whispered, "Pella."

"Pella no good Indian; wear 'um cross," and the old klooch huddling in her chair looked more repulsive than ever.

Lotta waited a moment as if to gather up the shreds of ebbing courage, then as the old Indian made no move to comply with her request, she placed another dollar on the table. Jingling against its companion, it sounded like the knell of doom in Lotta's guilty ears.

A swift gleam like the light of a glow worm came and went in the eyes of the witch; but still she remained motionless. In desperation Lotta emptied her purse of the remaining dollar and a few small coins, and said emphatically, "Make very bad medicine, Klooch."

"Ugh, ugh," and the old crone hobbled to a cupboard, took out a piece of wax candle and a bit of string, sat down on the squalid hearth to warm the wax and mould it into the crude image of a woman. Then she tied the string about the middle of the image and hung it in a recess at the side of the chimney, where it would gradually melt away.

"Very bad medicine," she grunted, scattering some herbs about the hearth and muttering in her native tongue. "Oyapella go away all same image—By-um-by no Oyapella," solemnly declared she, shaking her head at Lotta, who had looked on in awed silence.

Through a small window Joey and Pella had seen the mystic rites performed. With difficulty Joey suppressed his frightened sobs, and would have fled but for his loyalty to his chum. He took what comfort he could by clutching his birthday charm. Poor Pella could scarcely keep her place at the window for the shaking of her knees. The dim interior, the flickering light, the hobbling old witch, the

strained credulous white woman, and the suspended image, connected as they were with the superstitions of her tribe, combined to make a picture terrible indeed to her youthful imagination. Le Pere had time and again warned her that it was a sin to believe in magic—but how could she help it?

"Oh! Joey, I knew she hated me; she never speaks—only—when—teacher's—there. Oh! Joey, I'm afraid—and I wanted to go—outside—to live—like white—folks," sobbed the unhappy girl.

Pella fretted and worried about the bad magic until she lost her rosy cheeks and happy spirits—she felt her doom. The whole settlement knew about the magic. One day Pella was on her way to the store for supplies, a visitor and the kindly priest, Le Pere, were a short distance behind her.

"Why do the women draw to one side to let her pass?" questioned the visitor.

"It is their belief in the efficacy of magic; they look upon her as already dead. You see Pella's mother is a full-blood Indian and inherits the superstitions of her tribe, and although her father was a French-Canadian woodsman and of our faith, his civilization is overborn. Pella is at heart a little heathen, a little devotee to magic. She longs for the wider life out beyond, but that might be dangerous for her just at this time. Faith must prevail over superstition. God's will be done," and he held the crucifix to his breast.

At the store door appeared Joey. "O Pella, good news! The old Indian who comes to gather herbs sometimes is here. He can make good medicine fer yer."

A momentary gleam of hope lit Pella's sombre eyes; she felt an easy of the heaviness upon her heart. Presently the chums set off to visit the temporary tepee near the woods, Jip yipping at their heels. Here they found a brown and gnarled old man, squatting in the doorway serenely smoking. He listened in silence to their story, then said in the native tongue, "Dance at night-time in the burial ground. If your fathers, many times removed, come out to dance with you, it is very good medicine." He resumed his pipe and continued his inscrutable gaze into the distance.

Pella and Joey crept away, Jip with drooped tail ambling after them.

Pella struggled many days between her fear of bad magic and death, and