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The Valley of Voices

By **GEORGE MARSH**

Author of
"Trailers of the Trail"
"The Whelps of the Wolf"

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CHAPTER XX

One bitter day in the middle of January six lean dogs, heads down, limped painfully across the clearing at Walling River. At the tail of the sled followed two men, whose haggard eyes and frost-cracked faces bore the scars of the barrage of the January blizzards.

"We have worried much, Michel and L," said the factor, as Steele and David thaved out before the trade-house stove. "You struck terrible weather. Did your rations hold out?"
"Yes, by cutting them in two," replied Steele with a grimace.
"We'll give you your fill as soon as it can be cooked. And your mission—it was successful?" hazarded the curious St. Onge, ignorant of the purpose of the six-hundred-mile midwinter journey.

"It was," and Steele handed the factor the oil-skin envelope. "Read that!"
St. Onge read the release in open-mouthed amazement.

"Man, man! How did you get it?" he gasped.
Steele described his meeting at Albany with Lascelles.

Unchecked tears slowly gathered in the eyes of the overjoyed old man. "My boy," he said brokenly. "It would be the proudest day of my life. You still care for her, don't you?" he demanded anxiously.

"You know I care for her," Steele gently answered, "but I went to Albany for her—not for myself. You must promise me that she hears nothing of this until I have left. She would think she had to pay—feel honor-bound. I know her, monsieur. You must not tell her."

"But if she cares? I feel, in her heart, that she does," protested St. Onge.
"She must be a free agent," insisted Steele. "I go south as soon as the dogs are rested. I shall talk to her first."

"I'm sorry, but as you wish it, I shall not tell her."
That night, after what, to the hungry Steele, was a sumptuous meal consisting largely of caribou, St. Onge left his guest and daughter alone.

During the meal the girl had furtively noted the frostbitten fingers of the American, the drawn cheeks, blackened and cracked by the wind of the Albany trail, the strained look in the gray eyes. Steele had warned to the sincerity of her welcome, the evident pleasure in her greeting. Exhausted as he was, the days before his departure were too few to waste one evening by seeking rest, so he watched her with hungry eyes as they talked, wondering whether her heart had changed. But she gave no sign, and he was too proud to ask.

On the evening before he left with David for Nepigon, he again sat alone with the woman for whose welfare he had given the best that was in him—for whom he had toiled and planned, faced the sting of the norther and the pinch of the searing cold; the woman he loved too deeply to make himself the recipient of her gratitude.

"You have never told me, monsieur, why you took that terrible journey to Albany," she said, after a silence in which her black brows were drawn together in evident abstraction.

The man's eyes softened as they lingered on the clean lines of her profile, the masses of her dusky hair, for she had asked the question with averted face as if fearing his answer.
"I went to Albany," he said, "to test my judgment of human nature."
"And you found—?"
"I found—that I was a mind reader," he answered with a smile.

"Is it a very great secret?" she asked with a wistful look in the dark eyes that searched his.
"No, you will hear—tomorrow."
"But, tomorrow—you go?"
"Yes."
"And I am not to know until you have gone? So that is it?"
"You will understand—tomorrow," he put her off with.

For a long interval she sat gazing at the rug at her feet, then leaned toward him, her face tense with feeling. "What must you think of me?" she demanded. "You have planned and worked for us, my father and me—given—given! And we—we have sat with folded hands while you toiled—and won. Oh, I want you to know how fine you have been through it all—want you to sense my gratitude—before you go."
She had risen and was pacing the floor—restraint gone.
"I have been selfish—inhabitable," she stammered on, her eyes avoiding his, "but I want you to know that there is nothing—nothing which I will not do—to prove my gratitude for what you have done." She turned from him and he knew by the convulsive move-

ment of her shoulders that she was weeping.
"There are some things without price," he said gently. "What I have done, I have not done—for reward. I know—that I have your gratitude—it is enough."
She turned swiftly upon him with: "But if you knew—"; seemingly confused, checked by a surge of emotion she could not control, she stood for an instant, inarticulate; then left him alone.

Late in February, long after the last of the fur cached at the Stopping had been traded with St. Onge, a dog-team driven by a strange Indian arrived at Walling River. To the surprised questions of the factor the driver answered that he had come from Nepigon station with a package and a letter addressed to Mademoiselle Denise St. Onge. The factor took the long, wooden box and the letter to his quarters where he found his daughter with Charlotte in the kitchen.

"A packet has arrived from Nepigon," announced the excited St. Onge, "with a box and a letter for you, my child."

"A letter for me?" she said, a wave of color sweeping her face, while St. Onge watched her curiously.

In the living room Denise St. Onge opened the letter, postmarked Kenora, and read:
"Mademoiselle St. Onge:
"Walling River.
"What I wrote you at Ogoke last autumn was a lie. I am sorry.
"Rose Bernard, formerly Lafamme."

The paper slowly slipped from the fingers of the numbed girl and fluttered to the floor.

"What is it? Who is it from?" demanded her father.
The face of Denise St. Onge was the color of chalk as she raised her hopeless eyes. "He went to Albany for



He Had Come From Nepigon Station With a Package and a Letter Addressed to Mademoiselle Denise St. Onge.

me," she said, as if to herself, "and would not tell me I was free, fearing my gratitude. And now—I receive this."

"But what is it?"
"Read for yourself, father," and the stunned girl walked to a window, and gazed with dry-eyed emorse out on the white valley.

"All, I deserve—all," she said, turning from the window. "But you are wrong when you think I did not know why he went to Albany—I knew. And I knew I was free the night before he left, when—I tried to tell him that—I loved him. But he thought it was gratitude—thought I was trying to pay. He is proud—oh, so proud!"

"He is a gallant gentleman, and did not know you cared," murmured the old man. "But what is in this box?"

While the girl at the window gazed on the desolate hills as on the white ruin of her happiness, the factor opened the cover of the box. Removing the heavy wrappings of paper protecting the contents, he gasped in surprise.

"Mon Dieu, mon Dieu!"
The girl turned from her bitter retrospection. "What is it?"
"Come here!"

She joined him and bent over the box. In its wrappings lay the ebony case of a violin. On the lid of the case letters of gold spelled: "Nicolo Amati, Cremona."

"An Amati!" she cried in her joy. "A priceless Amati!" Then, brokenly, "Father, father! I am paying—I am paying!"

With feverish haste the key was found and the case opened. She tenderly lifted the rare handiwork of the world-famous maker from its bed of velvet and impulsively caressed it with her cheek.

"And he sends no word—no letter?" cried the perplexed St. Onge.
She smiled at his naïvete. "There is no word to send, father. He is sorry there, in his gay New York, for the lonely woman he once knew in the wilderness. This," and she held aloft the violin, "is his anodyne for the desolate—the symbol of his pity."

It was May, and Brent Steele had been hard at work at the museum for three months. In March he had received two letters brought from Walling River by the messenger sent with the violin. The letter from the factor was strained and self-conscious. Together with brief mention of the arrival of the fur from the Stopping, St. Onge had profusely thanked his friend for the costly gift which had

made the long evenings again bright with music. But of Denise he said little, except that she was well and played incessantly. So much had happened that the winter seemed unusually long—was, in fact, a bit on their nerves, and the spring would be most welcome. Some day, St. Onge suggested, it might be possible for Steele to revisit the valley of the Walling. He knew the way and his friends there would live for that day.

The other letter was shorter. It ran: "Dear Monsieur Steele:
"A violin—and a Nicolo Amati! Your generosity and your thought of me make these words but feeble things. You, to whom gratitude is distasteful, must yet endure my heartfelt thanks, not only for the rare gift, but for the journey you made for my peace of mind through that terrible wind and cold. The violin will ever be a living memory of one who came, a stranger, to two lonely and hopeless creatures, and left them, facing the future with courage."
"Denise St. Onge."

If only the letter had given him a sign that she wanted him—needed him, instead of dwelling on her gratitude. She was so proud and so brave. If only he had taken her in his arms that last night, and learned from her eyes, the blood in her face, the beat of her heart, whether she was paying a debt of honor or—loved him.

Then, late in May, came a letter—addressed by a hand unused to the pen, and postmarked at Nepigon station on the Canadian Pacific. David doubtless had news and some one had written for him. Steele opened the envelope and read with increasing wonder and delight:
"Miseu Steele—
"If you weesh mameul you burn up de trail to Walling Reeveer queek. All de long snow she have play an play de sad museec an cry on her bed. Wen we go on hill first tam she lift her arm to de sout an say, Cum bak to me. Dat mean you. You cum lak de win. Michel tak dis to de railroad, he an me get marry wen messary cum in June.
Charlotte."

It was from the faithful Ojibway woman who had for so long faithfully served Denise.
That night the Montreal sleeper out of New York carried a man whose gray eyes were strangely happy. A week later two friends were poling the nose of a canoe into the spring freshet of the Jackfish as if pursued by a Windigo. Farther on they recklessly ran in succession each white-water of the swollen Rouge. Down Ogoke, the measured churn-swish, churn-swish of lunging blades marked off the miles to the outlet. Then riding the flood water of the racing Walling, one afternoon the canoe slid into the beach of the post.

In the trade-house Steele and David found St. Onge and his head-man. There were surprised greetings, then: "I have come for her," announced the American. "Where is she?"
"She has gone to the ridge," answered St. Onge with shining eyes. "You will find her with her violin—alone."

At the edge of the scrub, below the bare brow of the hill, Steele stopped, with a heart which jarred him with its beat. He wanted to watch her—listen to her playing—before making his coming known. With a shaking hand he peried the spruce and looked.

Silhouetted against the soft May sky, she stood with her violin, facing from him. Presently she tilted her head and drew the bow across the strings. Faintly drifted down to him the haunting minors of the "Elegie" he first heard at the rapids—the symbol of her fears and despair.

Then, of a sudden, the far call of errant Canadas broke in on the strains of the violin. The girl stopped short off and searched the sky for the wedge of geese. Out of the south she saw them coming and opened her arms. Then, as the violin changed its mood—broke into her own, "When Spring Comes North," he noiselessly approached her.

She finished, and as the last of the flock passed overhead, waved her bow. "Goodby! goodby!" she called, as the wanderers faded into the north.
"I have followed them back to you," spoke a low voice behind her.
The girl turned startled eyes on the man who stood smiling. Over her throat and face up to the dusky hair mounted the blood.
"You!" she faltered. "It's not a dream?"
"I have come back," he said, "for your gratitude."
"My gratitude?" She smiled through mist-veiled eyes, as he stood beside her. "You ask no more?" And she was in his arms, his face buried in the raven hair.
"Denise! Denise!"

She raised her flaming face to his, and there on the hilltop they stood, oblivious of the world.
"Do you think this gratitude?" she murmured at length.
"No—paradise!"
"At last—my spring—has come north," she sighed, "after the long snows."
[THE END]

No Mail for Him

The postal service is laughing at the story of a post-office inspector who went into the hills of Arkansas to check up a village post office. The neighbors said the P. M. had gone fishing. Finding him, the inspector asked, "Are you the postmaster?" After a minute the P. M. said, "Yep. What's your name?" "P. D. Smith."
The P. M. reached into his back pocket, took out a bunch of letters and running over them for the addressee, said, "Nope. Nothing fer ye," and went on fishing.—Capper's Weekly.

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Hunters shooting game birds during the hunting season are requested by the United States biological survey to examine all birds carefully for leg bands at the time they are shot. It will greatly aid the investigation being made by means of banded birds if bands are returned to the survey with accurate particulars regarding the exact spot where the birds were found, and any other pertinent information.—Pathfinder Magazine.

The Oldest Voter
Probably the only woman who has voted in every national election since Grover Cleveland was chosen President in 1892 is Mrs. Samuel Posey of Austin, Texas, whose privilege it has been since she was nine years old to cast the ballot for her blind father.

Tweet Tweet
Judge—You claim you were wide awake, but the driver of the other car says you were asleep.
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