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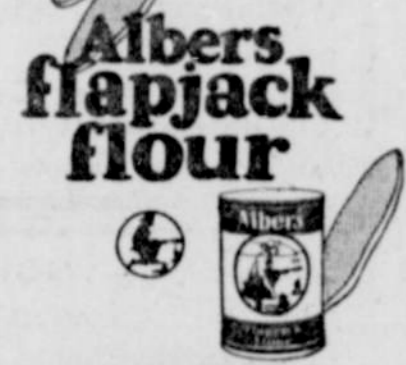
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The Valley of Voices

By GEORGE MARSH

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

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TO FIGHT

SYNOPSIS—With David, half-breed guide, Brent Steele, of the American Museum of Natural History, is traveling in northern Canada. By a stream he hears Denise, daughter of Col. Hialre St. Onge, factor at Walling River, play the violin superbly. He introduces himself and accepts an invitation to make the post his home during his stay. He finds the factor worried and mystified. The "log chateau" is a real home. From St. Onge he learns of the mysterious creature of evil, the "Windigo," and the disappearance of a canoe and its crew, with the season's take of furs. Then at night the "Windigo" gives a weird performance. Even Steele is mystified.

CHAPTER II—Continued

Steele strained from the window, waiting for a repetition of the wall. But the voice which had defied the night was hushed. From the clearing came the whimpering of awed huskies, the wolf challenge smothered in their throats. Among the dim shapes of the Indian shacks beyond the trade-house not a light flickered. They were as the houses of the dead. The post people lay in their blankets, stiff with fear. Like a shroud, panic had fallen on Walling River.

Throwing on his clothes, the man swung from the window and dropped to the grass below. The house, also, was dark—St. Onge doubtless drugged with cognac, but she? Did she lie numb with fright, or was she gallantly struggling with the mystery?

As he approached Michel's dark shack, Steele was puzzled. Had the Inquois and David also weakened? But two silent shapes, carrying something in their hands, met him at the door.

"You heard it, Michel?" demanded Steele, searching the swart face of the half-breed, as they left the shack for traces of excitement.

The features of Michel were set like stone as he said: "De Windigo get de fur cano; now he get de pos."

"What d'you mean?" quickly demanded Steele, fearing that the Indian in the head man had at last triumphed over his intelligence—that he, too, had succumbed to the general terror.

"Michel mean," explained David, "that de Indian will leave de pos' after tonight."

The white man was relieved. These two, at least, had not been stampeded by the nameless thing on the ridge. And then, as they reached the shore, it began again.

From the crest of the ridge came an unspeakable mewing, now strangely cat-like, now unearthly; followed by the moaning of a mangled thing in torture.

It ceased. The white man heard the rough breathing of the men beside him. Slowly the click of steel on steel marked the cocking of two rifles. Then upon the heavy silence broke the prolonged wailing of an Ojibway woman for her dead.

Rigid, the three men listened. The wailing climaxed in maniacal shrieks. Again the night was soundless.

Turning to Steele, Michel muttered: "Tete-Boule ees right; dat ees ver bad ting to hear."

"What is it, David?" Steele demanded of his hard-headed friend.

"Eef David was on dat ridge, he tell you," was the dry response.

"There's nothing on four feet in this country that could do that. There may be something in this Windigo story, after all. Is it beast, bird, or devil, Michel?"

"Eet may be crazee wolverine; eet may be devil; eet may be Windigo—but eet feenish dees pos' all de same." As the half-breed sadly shook his head, the caterwauling began anew.

With heads thrust forward the three men on the shore strove to pierce its mystery. But this time, as the voice rose to a climax, flame shot from the muzzles of two rifles and the shrieks were smothered in the report of the guns echoing from the ridge. Again silence blanketed the valley.

Thus did David and Michel fling back their challenge of lead to the powers of darkness which menaced the fur fort.

"The Windigo knows now that there's some fighting blood left in Walling River," chuckled Steele, when he heard approaching footsteps.

"Who's there?" called the voice of St. Onge. "Who fired those shots?"

"Michel and David, colonel; did you hear it?" asked Steele, curious to know the state of the factor's nerves.

St. Onge approached and gripped Steele's arm. "I've been listening—with my daughter," he said in a strained voice. "I went to rouse you, but you had gone. It's the last straw, monsieur. My Indians will not stay after this."

"What d'you think it is?" asked Steele, closely watching the features of St. Onge in the dim starlight.

"Who can say?" replied the Frenchman, with a shrug. "It may be some crazed beast—wolverine or lynx or bear. And then," he looked hard into Steele's eyes, "it may be—the Windigo."

At the words, David, who had been listening, turned to Michel in surprise. But the face of the head man was wooden. The Ojibway's narrow eyes shifted to those of Steele, and for a space white man and red held each other's gaze.

Was the Frenchman, after all, superstitious? Steele wondered. Had his nerve softened, after what he had now heard with his own ears; or was he playing a game?

"Colonel St. Onge," said the American after a space, "this thing has got to be followed up—run down—scotched! To you, it's vital! To me, as a scientist, it's the opportunity of a lifetime. With your permission, David and I will stay here and lend a hand until the winter threatens to break."

The factor impulsively offered his hand. "Thank you, monsieur! I shall be most grateful for your aid."

"And Mademoiselle St. Onge?" asked Steele, deeply curious. "She heard it all?"

"Yes, she called me when it began. She was very brave, but there have been so many things lately—" St. Onge suddenly checked himself. "Michel," he said, swiftly changing the subject, "we must look after the Indians at once. But what can we tell them now, after this?"

"We tell dem de Windigo weel ketch dem on de riviere eef dey leave now," replied the ready-witted head man.

As Steele again stretched himself on his cot, he wondered if there would be sleep that night for the girl downstairs—what thoughts were hers as she lay facing the problem of her future; a problem of which the sole solution seemed at that moment to rest with Monsieur Lascelles at Fort Albany.

There was no one in the living room when Steele entered early the following morning, but from the direction of the kitchen came the sound of women's voices. He was examining the shelves of French and English classics when he heard the light footfall of moccasins behind him. Diffident at meeting Denise St. Onge whose humiliation of the night before must have been deep, but naturally curious as to her mental condition after the night wailing, he turned with:

"Good-morning, mademoiselle! We are all here, you see, safe and sound, in spite of the serenade of our friend."

The fine eyes of the girl were heavy with shadows, but to his relief, were not unfriendly. She has not slept, thought Steele. The Windigo has got her, too.

"Good morning, mademoiselle! We turned in a voice without spirit, and there was no life in the colorless face as she went on: "Yes, we are still here, as you say; but after last night I trust you realize what my father faces in this terrible valley."

"It is most mysterious," he said, "but you must not allow it to get your nerve. You are an educated woman, mademoiselle; you must hold your mental grip. Nerve-racking? Of course it is, but there is a solution—mad wolf or wolverine probably." As he spoke, he strove to pierce the reserve of her dark eyes to the thoughts they masked.

"But it was horrible—ghastly!" she replied. "Is it to be wondered at that the Indians are in a panic—and these poor women whose husbands were with the fur canoe; they are imbeciles from terror. I found them this morning in a cabin, too frightened to cook the breakfast of the children."

"So you cooked it for them," he hazarded with a smile. Surely, Mademoiselle St. Onge had not lost her nerve, if she could think of the children."

The girl flushed. "One could not have them suffer, monsieur." Then with a flash of white teeth, went on, "But we all feel better, now that the sun is out."

"Has your father told you that I am staying here, with his permission, to follow up this Windigo?"

She glanced up in surprise. For an instant her eyes fell, the dark brows contracting in thought; then she met his quizzical look.

"You are going—to fight—the Windigo?—You, a stranger—who have—no interest?"

"But I have a very great interest, mademoiselle. I am sent into the field by the museum to study this sort of thing. Michel, David and I are going to fight him—and solve him."

"But you do not know the danger!" Her face was very grave as she faced him, and he now knew that his surmise had been correct.

"I do not understand what you mean. Not being superstitious, Michel, David and I have nothing to fear," he protested, hoping to draw her out.

"Oh, monsieur, you do not know all! There are so many—" The abrupt entrance of St. Onge cut off what Steele sensed she had intended as a warning.

"Good-morning, Monsieur Steele!" cried the factor, with what was palpably a forced liveliness of manner. "You have not changed your mind since our talk, eh? You will honor us by spending September at Walling River?"

"Father," Denise protested, "Monsieur Steele does not know—"

St. Onge turned petulantly upon his daughter.

"Monsieur Steele is a brave man and a scientist; he has no fear of your Indian devils and Windigoes."

"But he has a right to know all, if he is—"

"He shall know all, my dear," broke in the factor, evidently desirous of stopping further reference to what was blind mystery to the younger man.

"We shall have a week, mademoiselle, before David and Michel return, to make our plans," added Steele in defense of his host; but throughout the simple breakfast of trout, toast and coffee, his active brain was busy with the strange attitude of St. Onge and its cause.

At the trade-house the factor and his guest learned from the still shaky Tete-Boule that Michel and David had packed a canoe and provisions over the portage at daylight. But before starting down river on his quest with David, Michel had done his work well. Not an Indian dared leave the post because of the demon which the wily head man had assumed them was lying in wait for them. So, for a time St. Onge could count on keeping his post servants, and then—

"Well, who can foretell what is on the knees of the gods, monsieur?" he said with a characteristic shrug.

Through the following days while he impatiently waited for the return of David, Steele occupied his time with the study of two interesting subjects—Tete-Boule and Denise St. Onge. And he found in each much to stimulate his curiosity. The Indian, once a twist of nigger-head tobacco and the gift of a skinning knife had established friendly relations, was led to repeat the tales of huge tracks in the muskeg and night wailing which he had brought to the post during the summer. To Steele, familiar with shamanism and the practice of sorcery among the Ojibways and Crees, this squat red man, with his high cheek bones and close-set eyes, was something of a puzzle. Steele soon learned that Tete-Boule—who owed his name to the likeness of his broad face to the Tete-de-Boule Crees—was possessed of more than ordinary intelligence.

"Tete-Boule," demanded Steele in one of their conversations on the river shore, "why should this Windigo wish to harm this post; the people, here, have never done him an injury?"

The milk-like eyes of the Indian widened with fear at the mention of the dread name, which was taboo.

"Dis ees hees countree. Long tam ago, he cum here on dis riviere," the Indian muttered, evidently ill at ease.

"Was it the Windigo who drowned the men with the fur canoe?"

For a space the Ojibway smoked in silence, then spat far into the water before he answered.

"De crew ov de fur-cano' not drown—eat up!" And he opened his wide mouth and snapped his jaws.

"Will he come again by night to the post here?"

The Indian slowly nodded.

Further than repeating to Steele that in August he had seen huge tracks in the muskeg and heard cries at night similar to those which had wakened the post, Tete-Boule could not be led to talk. But what interested the American especially was to hear, later, from Denise St. Onge, that the squat post hunter was bewailing with the already stampeded Indians the fate which menaced them.

"This Tete-Boule ought to be suppressed," he suggested to St. Onge. "Your daughter tells me that he keeps the Indians in a ferment with his wild tales of demons and Windigoes."

"I've told him to stop it. But he is very superstitious. When he first came here from Albany, he was a most valuable man—very intelligent."

"He's doing a lot of harm, now. I wish Michel were here. You need him."

"Yes, he understands the Indians, and can quiet them," agreed the factor wearily. "And he is wasting his time down river."

"I am not so sure of that. They may find something." And Steele smiled into the Frenchman's eyes quizzically, but met a blank stare.

Well, with Steele on its trail, the "Windigo" is likely to have a lively time. And Steele?

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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