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The Valley of Voices

By GEORGE MARSH

Author of "Tales of the Trail" "The Whelps of the Wolf" (Copyright by the Peace Publishing Co.) (W. N. U. Service.)

"MY VALLEY!"

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. Milaire 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. David, Steele's Indian, and Michel, St. Onge's headman, leave for the scene of the canoe's disappearance in an attempt to solve the mystery.

CHAPTER III

As the days passed at Walling River, and the dread voice failed to break upon the crisp September nights with a recurrence of its horror, the people timidly took up the old order of their days. The rabbit snares in the forest were again visited and reset by the women, who traveled in pairs for mutual encouragement, and one day Tete-Boule was prevailed upon by the factor to go out with another Indian after moose, for the foot needed fresh meat. As he left, the Ojibway gravely shook the hands of the fearful women and children gathered on the shore, bidding them look upon him for the last time, for by night he and his comrade would be mangled flesh in the maw of the Windigo.

"Did you hear that fool?" Steele asked St. Onge, standing near him on the beach.

"This thing has ruined him as a hunter," replied the factor, "he will never recover from it."

"I think I'll run upstream to the rifles this morning and catch some dore for supper," said the younger man as they returned to the trade-house.

Later, a second canoe quietly left the post, but when the boat reached the rapids, a mile above, the occupant did not stop to fish but continued upstream following the shore. And when the flash from the paddles of the craft above ceased, and the spot on the river which was the canoe, moved to the shore, the boat following, also turned in, and was lifted and hidden in the alders. Then the premonition of Tete-Boule attained a partial fulfillment, for on the shores of the Walling started a man hunt; but the incentive in the hunter was not a craving for human flesh, but a mild curiosity.

Before sunset the safe return to the post of Tete-Boule and his partner was heralded with joy, although they had failed in their hunt. But it was well after dark before the second canoe slid silently in to the stony beach.

"You had no luck this afternoon, monsieur, you caught nothing?" laughed St. Onge as Steele appeared for supper.

"As a matter of fact, Colonel, I went hunting, but the game was too tame for sport."

St. Onge's black brows lifted. "You are cryptic, monsieur."

"Well, to confess," laughed Steele, "I was interested to see how much hunting your men would really do—and I found out."

"You followed Tete-Boule's canoe?"

"Yes, I watched them for a few hours, but as they showed no sign of taking to the bush, I traveled over to those ponds Michel told me about. Tomorrow, if you have a man who will help me pack the meat, I'll get a moose."

"And Tete-Boule never left the river?"

"Not while I watched him."

The factor shrugged significantly. "He's 'bush shy' now and will not hunt. But what is there to do?"

"Have you thought that he might be shamming to avoid work? Is he lazy?"

"No, he always was a good packer and hunter. It's the Windigo."

In the week past, Steele had seen all too little of the girl whose personality had so vividly aroused his interest, whose moods, defying analysis, only added to her charm. Convinced that beyond a dread of the ugly alternatives which the future might present to her choice, beyond any possible fear of the manifestations of the supernatural which the post had witnessed, there lurked a tangible cause for anxiety, his active mind had been ceaseless in its groping for a clue to its nature. Two days following the night of terror, he had spent searching the big ridge for sign of wolverine, lynx or wolf, had produced nothing in explanation of the mysterious cries, but while his eyes swept the dry floor of the forest to

right and left, his thoughts had dealt with the reiterated query: "Whom did she fear at the rapids? What was she about to tell me when St. Onge interrupted? She had said, 'But you do not know the danger! and, there are so many—' Many what? Clearly there was something more than the Windigo in this warning. But what could it be?"

So Steele returned from his profitless search of the ridge to wait for the return of David and Michel, when a definite plan of campaign could be framed.

On a morning when the warm September sun, lifting the low-lying river mists, rolled them back on ridges, here and there already flecked with the yellow and gold of a frost-painted birch or poplar, Denise St. Onge appeared at breakfast in white and heavy boots. Steele stared in surprise at the change in face and manner of his hostess. The ghost of worry had left her eyes, which shone with high spirits. Her mood of silence had given way to a gaiety foreign to his knowledge of her.

"This beautiful morning, monsieur, Charlotte and I go to wave an au revoir to the summer which passes."

"Charlotte is to be envied," he replied, charmed with the note of cheerfulness.

Her eyes lighted with amusement. "It is possible that it might be arranged that we take with us a body-guard," she said archly. "Of course, it is not for ladies to demand the presence of cavaliers—"

"Take me, oh fair lady, as thy knight!" he begged.

"Laggard though you are, you may escort us to my watch tower, where Charlotte and I go to play the spring north, and to wave a bon voyage to the last of the geese."

"It is charming of you, mademoiselle, to allow me to go," he said, delighted at having the girl to himself in her gay mood. Accompanied by the staid Charlotte, carrying a birch bark basket containing the lunch, and whose swart face betrayed misgivings she dared not voice, Denise St. Onge appeared at the trade-house.

"You will not go without your rifle, monsieur?" queried St. Onge as Steele joined them.

"Is the Windigo dangerous in broad daylight?" facetiously asked Steele.

The bronze face of the factor reddened.

"The Windigo may strike in the day or night, monsieur. Who knows? It is well you go armed." And he handed the Mannlicher to the American, who took it, mystified, irritated, that the man to whom he had offered his services should withhold his confidence.

Led by the girl, hardly recognizable in her sudden metamorphosis from a creature of reticence and aloofness to one quick with life, vibrant to the magic of the sunlit September hills, they took the trail to an isolated ridge about a mile back from the river.

The Watch tower was aptly named, for unlike most of the high land of the country, the hill was capped by a bare brow of rock commanding a little valley studded with a chain of miniature lakes. Beyond, a sweep of rolling forest faded into the haze of the southern horizon.

"Is it not beautiful—my valley, monsieur?" she asked with a wide sweep of her arm.

"Beautiful!" he repeated. "And you come here often?"

"Yes—that is, we used to come here; but lately—" She caught herself up sharply, then continued, "This valley, monsieur, I call my Vale of Tempe. It is enchanting to watch the spring slowly sweep it with its magic—paint in, here and there, the soft green of the young birch leaves, the silver of poplar, and balm of gilead; then rim that brook with the red of the willow buds. And the first flowers of the forest—hepatica, purple and pink and white; violets and wood anemone and trillium—"

She paused, the dark eyes grew wistful—the voice throaty, as she continued: "Once there was no terror in these green forests; once we searched, unafraid, Charlotte and I, for the flower treasures they possessed. Come and find us! they called, and dall, we sought them and brought them home to transplant in our garden, but now—"

"But now?" he repeated, wondering if he were, at last, to know—to be made a sharer in her secret.

But she eluded him. "Charlotte and I often came here to dream and play away the day—that is, I did," she laughed. "Poor Charlotte at times was bored, oh, so bored! Was it not so, Charlotte?"

"Enh, enh! Yes!" mumbled the Ojib-

way woman, who sat on a rock apart from the two, her restless eyes sweeping the scrub below them.

"Charlotte is not bored now; she's scared to death," suggested Steele with a laugh.

"Has she not reason, monsieur?" protested Denise. "But we have not been here, she and I, since midsummer. And I miss it so."

"You fear to come here now—believe in this thing?" He welcomed the opportunity to put the question directly.

The dark eyes frankly met his. "Is there not good reason, monsieur, for fear in a woman? After the fur canoe—and that night?"

Natural as had been her reply, Steele intuitively sensed that she was dissembling—to avoid his inevitable questioning was willing to have him believe that she, too, was a victim of the general superstition. But she had betrayed herself the morning her father cut short her half-uttered warning. Well, the day was young and he feared to press her then for an explanation of what she patently desired to avoid. So with a nodded assent to her question, he changed the subject.

"We are to have gay music today, mademoiselle. You remember, you promised we should be merry."

"Yes, today the violin shall sing of joy; it is too beautiful here to be sad. Even though the first gray geese of the year pass south, I shall send them no message."

"And this message—is it a secret?"

"A secret, monsieur? What secrets can a woman cherish in these forests?" Her reply had been spontaneous, innocent of subterfuge; then, in his lifted eyebrows and humorous curl of lip, she caught the reflection of the double implication of her question, and her face flushed to the temples.

"Have you ever longed to journey south with the passing geese?" he quickly asked, gallantly covering her embarrassment. "As you play them down the skies, do you not wish to join them?"

"Why, Monsieur Steele, you have stolen my dreams," she cried, radiant with surprise. "Always, as they pass, I stand here calling to them to lend me wings to follow—follow into the south. I try to lure them back with my violin—but no, they pass. So I send them down the wind to a mad quick-step—my bon voyage, my farewell—until spring pipes them north."

She had risen, and her eyes, shining with emotion, her face, vivid with the color of her thoughts, strangely stirred the man who listened. The lines of her straight body, from shoulders to trim feet, held his eyes.

Watching her, Steele asked himself what this strange girl, tense as the strings of her violin, with her moods of aloofness and silence, followed by swift changes to whimsical gaiety and lightness of spirit, was coming to mean to him. As her eyes again met his he wondered what memories he should carry down to Nepigon in October.

"And the message you send with the geese?" he asked. "There is homesickness in it for your France—your Touraine?"

"Ah," she sighed, "is it not natural, monsieur? I do long for the roses and the poppy fields—the warm sun on the white roads and the laughter of the people. There is no laughter at Walling River—now." She raised her hands in eloquent gesture. "The winter here is so long—so cold. The eternal wind in the spruce—does it not speak to you, too? To me there are always the voices—voices of hunger and pain—and death."

"Yes, summer or winter," he said. "The voices are everywhere, in the white-waters, the spruce, the hills. And often, in the breeze, the forest becomes one great orchestra."

"You have heard it, too?" she cried, "the sweep of the violins, the moaning of the cellos?"

"I always hear them in the summer, from a river; with the drum-beat of rapids as accompaniment."

"Ah, there is much of the poet in you, monsieur." And for an instant there was a light in the girl's eyes which set wild thoughts stirring in his brain. "But our winter is beautiful, also, in moods," she went on. "The quiet days with the sun on the snow—I love then to walk in the forest. And the winding snowshoe trails; do they not call you to follow?"

Evidently Steele has fallen in love with the beautiful French girl. And her feelings?

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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