

Weird Tales

REGISTERED IN U.S. PATENT OFFICE



A MAGAZINE of the

BIZARRE and UNUSUAL

VOLUME VI

NUMBER 4

Published monthly by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company, 408 Holiday Building, Indianapolis, Ind. Entered as second-class matter March 20, 1923, at the postoffice at Indianapolis, Ind., under the act of March 3, 1879. Single copies, 25 cents. Subscription, \$2.50 a year in the United States; \$3.00 a year in Canada. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts, although every care will be taken of such material while in their possession. English office: G. M. Jeffries Literary Agency, Hopefield House, Hanwell, London, W. 7. The contents of this magazine are fully protected by copyright and must not be reproduced either wholly or in part without permission from the publishers. FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor.

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A Chat With the Readers

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MICHAEL ANGELO stood behind the agency building shining shoes for the agent's wife. Whatever resentment he might have felt at being assigned so menial a task, and one certainly not within the scope of his duties as agency clerk, he concealed behind a mask of stolid indifference. His parents had not given him the name of Michael Angelo. To them, and to his people, the Folles Avoines, he was He-comes-rumbling, a man of the Thunder clan. But, to ears accustomed to the English language alone, the native name seemed hard, and so the good missionaries at the Friends' School, having run out of William Penns, George Washingtons, and Abraham Lincolns for that school generation, had renamed him Michael Angelo, and the name had stuck to him through their school, followed him through Carlisle, and was now his official cognomen on the Indian reservation. One of his brothers, with utter disregard to family ties, even as the white man knows them, was named, at the same time, Henry Clay, and another Robert E. Lee. However, Mike did not care; most of his people labored under two titles, one for government purposes, and one for home consumption, and

they found it handy, rather than otherwise.

A shadow fell across the bench where Michael Angelo sat, and he looked up to see an elderly Indian, partly clad in the native garb of his tribe; leggings of deerskin, moccasins, a calico shirt, and a Stetson hat that crowned his shock of dark hair, bobbed at his shoulders. The older man sat down on the end of the bench, and produced a pipe with a carved redstone bowl and a short wooden stem. From a beaded buckskin pouch he extracted some tobacco, mixed with kinnikinic, loaded his pipe, with great deliberateness, tamped down the tobacco with a little carved stick, lighted it, and smoked a while in silence. Then he began to speak in their ancient tongue. In a rich, clear, bell-like voice he spoke, and a white bystander, hearing the sonorous cadence of his words, the gentle rise and fall of their pitch, after the custom of the Folles Avoines, would have imagined that the old man was addressing words of encouragement or sympathy to the other, but he would have been grossly mistaken. The voice of the elder was, indeed, warm and sympathetic, but the words were bitter and sarcastic.

"So, nephew, my sister's son, you are cleaning moccasins for the agent's woman! It is good! Your great-grandfather, Fierce-for-his-country, was a man the very mention of whose name made the mountians tremble. It is even said that he killed five Yellow Earth warriors at one time. They attacked him from ambush, it is said, but he slew them all with his wife's corn pounder. Then there was your mother's father, Scares-them-all. He too was of the nature of a warrior. He joined the Sioux and went on the warpath with them far up the Upper Missouri, and came home covered with scars and with his shirt and leggings fringed with the scalps of enemies. Then there was your father, who fought in the Black Hawk war. They relate that he swam out into the Mississippi and upset a canoe loaded with Yellow Earths, warriors all, in the dark, and drowned three of them and escaped alive. They say truly, too, for I was there also, and drowned two more myself. I speak not of your father's family, but they too were never known to wear skirts. They were of the Thunder clan like yourself, of course, but, until now, who ever heard of a bearer of the Feathered Name [a member of the Thunder Clan] doing a woman's work? And you call yourself a *man!*"

Michael Angelo swept the brush back and forth over the shoe that he held in his hand. To all appearances he might not have heard a word of what his uncle had said. His pulse had not quickened, his face was as immobile as ever. Only his eyes betrayed any inward emotion. They had narrowed to slits, and from them shot a venomous gleam that, in a small way, reminded one of the crooked lightnings that flash from the eyes of his distant relatives the Thunder Birds, when they sweep the earth with their rains and loose their bolts of fire and destruction. Still Mike did not speak.

"It would not be so bad," continued the elder Indian, "if"—(he gave the agent's wife her name in the vernacular, and though descriptive, and keenly apt, it was not complimentary enough to bear translation)—"she were a friend to our people. One may do much for a friend, with honor. But she is not. She hates us. When she was employed at the agency, before the agent's real wife died, she treated us like dogs when we came in on business. Yes, she was too good for anything Indian, except our money. She was glad to take that. But the agent's old wife, she was a real woman. She had sympathy for the distressed, and help for the sick and poor. But this one treats us all, and you especially, like dirt under her feet. And, now that she has married the agent, she has her chance to do us harm every day. I don't see how he came to marry her—unless she worked magic on him. They say she believes in Indian magic. And He-comes-rumbling, of the Thunder clan, does a woman's work for that old Stinking Turtle!"

Michael Angelo continued with his task, and his uncle, having vented his spleen, went on about his business. But every bitter word that he had uttered had sunk deep in the breast of He-comes-rumbling. The wicked glint had left his eyes, and outwardly he was calm, but his blood boiled. It is no light thing among Indians to take a scolding from one's uncle, and he was roused to action. The shoes shone as never before, and still he worked on them. It was a long time before he carried them in to the agent's wife, but their fine polish brought him no thanks.

A large, arrogant woman, built like a draft horse, with coarse iron-gray hair and a red-streaked complexion, she curled back her lips contemptuously and switched back her skirt as if she feared contamination from the Indian as he entered the room.

"Put them there, Mike," she said, with a scorn that seemed to add "You dog" to the spoken words.

"Certainly, Mrs. Dachs," said Michael Angelo, with all due courtesy, and he withdrew, quietly, as he had entered. As he passed from the room his eyes fell upon a book handsomely bound in limp leather, and bearing the name of a famous work on religion and health. "That's so," he thought in English; "she is a Christian cultist. My ideas of that faith are hazy, to say the least, but it seems to me that they believe that mind can be made to triumph over matter. Now the corollary to that is that they believe that unless they have sufficient faith, matter will triumph over mind. Not so very different from Bad Medicine among us, is it?" A smile crossed his dark features. "*Eh, anamekut!*" His thoughts reverted to his own language. "*Kenabutch gagun!*—Dog-gone it, I think I have it! Pagan Science!" With a chuckle the Indian passed out of the hall and into the world of his people.

OLD Owl Man stared into the glowing embers of his wigwam fire and smoked. His hard, wrinkled features held something sinister about them. His hooked nose, long and sharp, his high forehead, with its crown of scanty hair that rose in two peaks over his forehead, and his strange, fascinating eyes, large and dark, attracted the attention of all who saw them, red or white, and gave him at times the look of the owl his namesake. At other times he resembled more a giant spider, and then, again, if one touched his clammy skin, there was the cold smooth feeling of a snake. Among red men and white he bore an evil reputation. The Indians, who loathed and dreaded him the most, would have slain him long ago, save for the fear that they held of his dread magic. It was whispered that he had the power to take from his

sacred bundle the skin of a bear, sing a certain song, don the skin, and become a bear. Others said that he derived his powers from the owl, and could become an owl at will. Still others claimed that he was in league with the serpents, and that the master of all snakes, the greatest power for evil on "This Island", the earth, the Great Horned Serpent, came out of the Bear River, or from a dismal swale not far from his lodge, and held mysterious communion with him. To pacify the Snake, his master, it was necessary for him to take a human life a year. These and other tales of gruesome rites gave him a reputation that caused people to avoid him. But tonight he had company—Michael Angelo.

"Eh, grandson," said the old wizard, "what you ask me is very hard. It is well known that Indian medicines have no effect on most white people."

"But it is already whispered among us that she really believes in some of our magic. The women say that she married the agent by means of a love medicine that she got from old Betsey, the medicine-woman."

"About old Betsey I know nothing. It may well be true. That white woman and her family have always lived on the Indians, and among them. It is certain that they despise us, and have done us all the harm in their power, but yet they may believe in some of our ways. Yes, grandson, it can be done, it can be done. But it can not be done for nothing. Four times I must try before I can be successful and that calls for a four-legged animal—a leg to pay for each attempt."

"*Hau, Nimaso!* It is well, my grandfather! There is a four-legged animal hitched to yonder sapling. It is yours. Moreover, that day that you are successful, on that very day, I say, I will ride over and leave another pony hitched to the same sapling."

IT WAS a warm spring night, and rain was drizzling down the valley of the Bear, enveloping the agency buildings in mist and moisture. Mrs. Dachs, crossing the agency yard, was surprised to see what appeared to be a ball of fire passing through the air, waist-high, and not far distant. That she saw it in truth, and was not resting under any illusion, she was quickly convinced, for her house servant, an Indian girl called Mani, who was following her, screamed aloud. "Oh, Mrs. Dachs, it's a witch!"

"Nonsense, you little fool, there are no such things as witches!"

"Yes, ma'am, all my people believe it! But mebbe it ain't to bother us, they say that when an Indian witch begins to witch you to death he comes first like a ball of fire, and then he changes into a fox and barks at you and—"

"Yap!" A single shrill bark cut the air, and before the two women stood a small red foxling.

"Scat, you devil!" cried Mrs. Dachs, and there was a shrillness in her voice betokening a fear she would not admit. The foxling vanished.

"JOHN," said Mrs. Dachs to her husband that night, "I wish you would forbid old Owl Man to come to the agency. The dirty old scoundrel was in today when I was using the telephone. He didn't speak to me, but he fixed those terrible eyes on me with such a look! They seemed to burn me, and I can't help it, he gets on my nerves."

"Now, Flora, he's a harmless old codger, and he was down on business. I haven't any excuse to drive him away. He can't help it if he looks unattractive."

"You don't need any excuse to drive any Indian away. You are the agent, and you have authority over them. A dirty Indian hasn't any rights like white people anyway. I

hate the whole boiling of them; they're no better than beasts! What the government had to give them this good valuable land for, anyway, is more than I can see. Why didn't they just take the land and let the Indians starve?"

"Well, Flora, if you say so, I will order the Indian police to chase old Owl Man back home. He isn't educated enough to complain if he gets unfair treatment, and even if he were, we'd find a way to hush him. We always have hushed the others."

MIDNIGHT, and a full moon, but a cloudy sky. When the drifting cloud-banks passed by, the agency was lit up with a clear white light, with inky shadows here and there, and the jetty forest shades beyond. Agent Dachs slept soundly, but Flora, his wife, tossed and turned. Her usually florid face was haggard, and she muttered aloud. The door opened softly, and a strange hunched figure slipped noiselessly into the room. Like one of the black moon-shadows outside it seemed to drift across the floor, making no sound as it slithered over the Navaho blankets that served as rugs. It paused by the bed a moment, and then raised itself erect. It seemed to be a bear—an ugly bald-faced black bear, that stood there swaying backward and forward. It bent over the twisting form of Flora Dachs, and spread out its paws. A moonbeam, darting across the room, fell upon a white patch on the animal's chest, and was reflected from a slit in the dried hide whence peered the terrible eyes of Owl Man. Softly the wizard swayed there, then he bent over, placing his very lips on the mouth of his victim. Ensued a horrible gurgling sound like a death-rattle, and for a moment the coarse figure of the woman writhed hideously. Then the bear dropped on all fours and was gone. Scarcely had it vanished from the room when the

woman's voice rose in a terrified scream: "John! John! Wake up! Those ——— Injuns have witched me, John!"

"Nonsense, Flora! Wake up yourself, you're having a nightmare! There is no one here!"

"But there was, John! A bear was just in this room, sucking my breath away!"

"That's impossible, Flora, the doors are all locked and——" The agent's voice trailed away and ended in a choking gasp. On the floor, shining as if with phosphorescence, were plainly outlined the pad prints of a giant bear. Flora was in shrieking hysterics.

A PLEASANT spring day, and, with a party of white friends, Flora Dachs was gathering trailing arbutus along the banks of the Bear River. There was nothing to suggest evil. It was not a country frequented by uncanny creatures; and witches, among Indians as well as other races, prefer the dark for the practise of their craft. Yet, as the nerve-racked woman placed her hand among the ferns to seize a flower, there was a swift stroke, and a vicious triangular head shot past her hand, the rough scaled skin of the snake grazing her flesh like sandpaper. A rattlesnake had struck without the usual warning, and missed. From the gloomy depths of the pines across the river an owl hooted mournfully, and somewhere in the distance came a demoniac cackle of laughter from a loon. The woman, first livid with fear, fainted in the ferns.

A thousand memories troubled Flora Dachs. A bold, unscrupulous woman, she had spared no means to attain her ambitions. Again and again dead faces rose from the grave, pallid and cold, to torment her with the glare of set and gelid eyes, as she tossed on her bed. A woman of some education and pretensions to a men-

tality which she did not possess, a coarse-fibered creature, who believed she had no nerves, who tried to view the world and her associates with a cold austerity and skepticism, she was beginning to find out strange things about herself. And one was that fear, which she believed she had banished from among her emotions as a fraud, was beginning to dominate her. Among her troubled visions was Owl Man, the old sorcerer. Driven from the agency at her behest, somehow, and in the most unexpected places, he contrived to meet her, and always she felt her eyes drawn by his—those strange, fascinating eyes, so terrible, and yet so irresistible, which held the gaze and seemed to sear the flesh. She knew, and was ashamed to say, that he seemed to terrorize her. And somewhere, subconsciously, she felt that there was a purpose behind it that she could sense but not understand. It was as if the old man sought vengeance for some forgotten wrong. And whenever they met there was a terrible vision that night for the tormented woman, or an untoward and nearly fatal accident. It seemed as if she were being drawn, by an inexorable power, into a tragic trap. Yet, while her primal self cried out in terror, her veneer of education laughed hollowly and said there was no such thing, and no white man would accept the evidence she had to offer as proof.

IT WAS two hours past midnight. Her husband away, Flora was trying to sleep alone. Racked by her apprehensions, haggard and worn by memories and recent experiences, she tossed and rolled. There were memories that would not down, things she could not forget—things that no one living could know. There was the sick Indian girl whom she had cared for, and who died, leaving a great fortune in timber holdings to her. It was not murder—no, not *that!* A little

neglect, that was all! But the memory tortured. As she buried her head under the covers, it seemed as if her head was on fire and her heart burned in her body. Something, like a bright ray, pierced her, searching out her soul.

"I didn't! You d——, I didn't!" she screamed, sitting bolt upright, and throwing back the bedclothes. Her fascinated stare through the open window was held by a huge hunched-up object on the limb of a tree that nearly touched the wall—a giant owl, with luminous eyes that fixed a hideous gaze upon her. With a scream both of fear and rage, the doomed woman sprang from her bed and hurled herself at the monster bird. But there was no impact of bodies; instead she hurtled through space, through the form of the owl itself, which dissolved in shadows, and crashed through the light branches to the rocky ground below. In the distance a barred owl hooted three times, exultantly.

"N'HAU, grandfather! It is I, He-comes-rumbling, of the Feathered Name, and I come riding another four-legged animal as a gift to you, according to my promise! *Hau, n'dabokinan*, I give it to you."

"*Kanwinna!* No indeed, grandson! I cannot take it! Instead there are four horses tied behind the lodge waiting as a gift for you! Yes, take them, you have indeed earned them! It is true that I have a little mysterious power, but, when I had my sacred dream of the Horned Serpent, as a young man, it was vouchsafed to me that I might never use it on my own behalf, no, not unless someone else asked me to use it for him would I loose the evil things I hold. Four winters I have waited for this! Yes, perhaps you did not know, but Flows-swiftly, the girl who died and left all her property to the one who fell from the window, was my grandchild!

"Listen, grandson of mine, you did well to come to me. But it was by my will that you came. I called you in spirit. That I can do easily. You are a modern young man, you have had the benefits of a white man's education, and you and I are together in this, so I will tell you something about how it was done. But some of it I can not explain. That part is mysterious, and comes from the Horned Snake, my dream guardian. I have power to make people—yes, even you—see things that do not exist. I made that woman see a ball of fire and a fox. Oh, yes, the Indian girl who was with her saw them too. It was easy. I stared them both in the face at the agency, and I thought, hard: you will see thus and so, tonight! I made her see a snake that struck without warning. I made her see an owl (ha ha! an owl that looked like me!) in the tree, and when she tried to throttle it, it was not there, and she fell to the rocks! But I was the bear that came into her room. Yes, even I, Owl Man, dressed in an old black bear skin, came in and stood over her, and she cried out aloud in her sleep and told me that she had done away with my granddaughter. She had tormented and neglected her to death. Yes, and all the wrongs she had ever done to my people and hers came out that night, and never again did she forget them, even for a single moment. She could only remember a vision of a bear who sucked her breath, and she and her husband saw only fiery tracks across the floor. But I *knew*, ho ho! Listen, grandson, I am the last sorcerer among the tribe, and I am an old man. Yet I have power! When you hear from Indians again about the things that they have seen, do not believe what you hear they saw, but believe that back of it all there is a mysterious power, such as I have from the Horned Snake, that makes them think they have seen things that do not exist!"