



Weird Tales

REGISTERED IN U.S. PATENT OFFICE

Volume 24

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Published monthly by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company, 2457 E. Washington Street, Indianapolis, Ind. Entered as second-class matter March 20, 1923, at the post office at Indianapolis, Ind., under the act of March 3, 1879. Single copies, 25 cents. Subscription, \$3.00 a year in the United States, \$4.00 a year in Canada. English office: Charles Lavell, 13, Serjeants' Inn, Fleet Street, E. C. 4, London. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts, although every care will be taken of such material while in their possession. 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.

NOTE—All manuscripts and communications should be addressed to the publishers' Chicago office at 840 North Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Ill. FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor.

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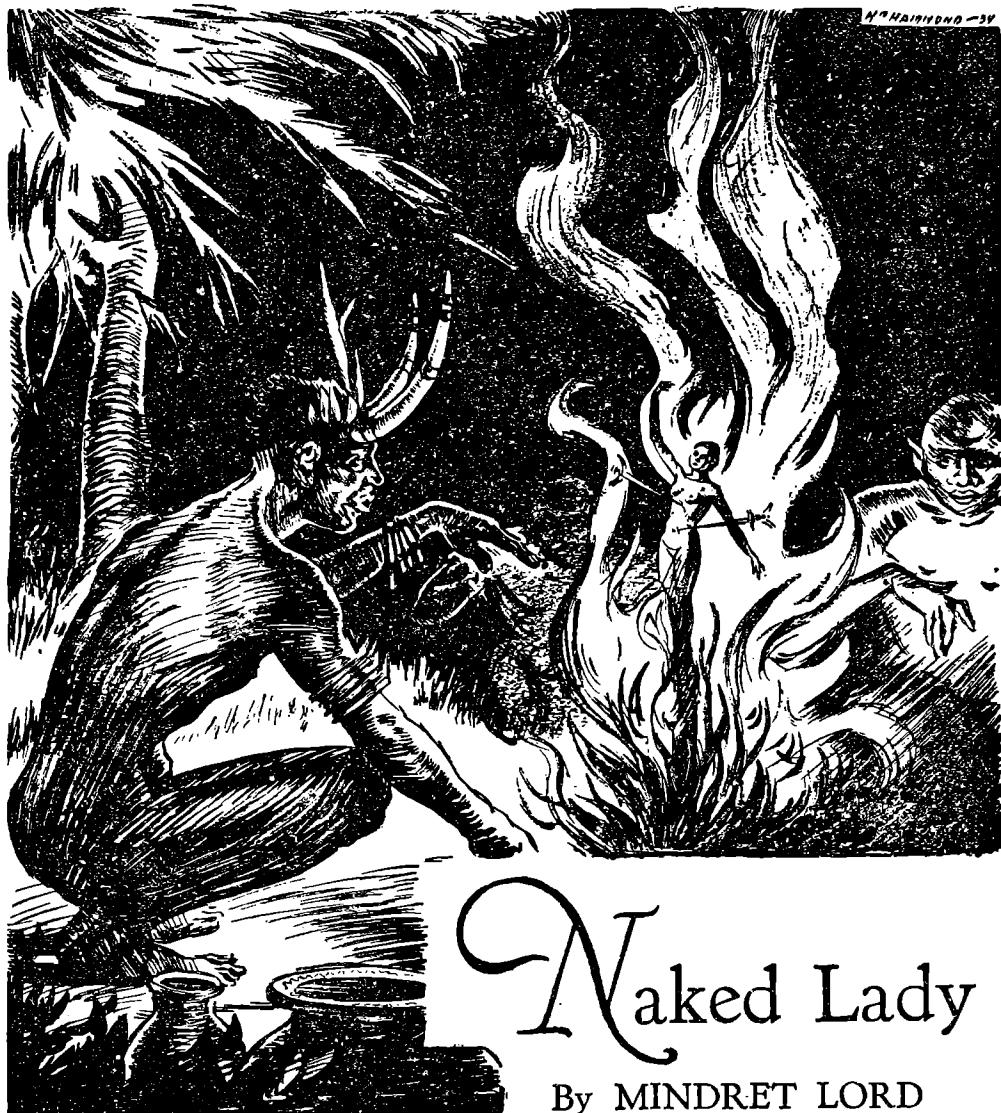


WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

W. T.—1

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"Twenty—thirty years ago—a night in the Haitian jungle—when was it?"



Naked Lady

By MINDRET LORD

This is not a sex story, but is an ingenious tale of West Indian voodoo and a millionaire's strange scheme for vengeance on the actress whom he had married

MARION VAN ORTON finished packing her dressing-case, opened her purse to make sure that her steamer tickets were still there, took one last look in the mirror and then descended the wide, polished staircase of the Van Orton mansion for the last time. Gorham, the butler, met her at the door.

"Madam will be gone for the week end?" he asked.

"Including the week end," Mrs. Van Orton amended.

The town car was waiting at the curb. He helped her into it and stood waiting at the door while she settled back comfortably. She looked up questioningly.

"Will Madam leave any message?" Gorham asked.

"Oh," she sighed, "just say I've gone."

"For an indefinite stay, Madam?"

Languidly, Mrs. Van Orton motioned to the chauffeur. "No," she said. "Just say I've gone."

The purring motor drew away. Only Gorham's eyes moved as he watched it turn the corner. With a start he recovered himself and closed his mouth. "Well!" he said as he walked up the stairs. A greater degree of volubility had returned to him when he reported the incident to the cook.

JUST for the moment, Gilda Ransome's life had crystallized into one desperate wish: if she couldn't scratch her thigh, this instant, she would go stark, raving mad. A few hours earlier she had thought that if she didn't have breakfast life would be insupportable. Hunger was bad enough—but this itch!

"You may rest now," said Mr. Blake, the well-known designer of the fleshier covers of the naughtier magazines. He turned away and lit a cigarette. Gilda applied her nails to her skin as she went behind a screen and drew on a dressing-gown.

She began to think about her hunger again. She was not hungry because she was on a reducing diet—she needed neither reduction nor addition. Every artist for whom she had posed had agreed that her figure was "just the type"—presumably the type that sells magazines. And her face was certainly no less attractive than her figure—which is an emphatic statement.

She felt starved because influenza had kept her idle for three weeks and during that time her money had run out. She had never been one to save.

Later in the day she fainted while try-

ing to hold a tiring pose. Mr. Blake was very much annoyed, and he determined that in the future he would use stronger, if less perfect, models.

IN THE West Indies there were many, many men who would have testified to the cleverness of Jeremiah Van Orton. As a lad of twenty he had come to Curaçao from Holland, and for forty-five years thereafter he had remained in the Indies. Then he had decided that he was too rich and too old to go on working. That was his first mistake. If he had kept his nose to the grindstone, he would not have come to New York. He would not have met Marion Martin, the actress. He would not have made a fool of himself.

Van Orton sat huddled in front of an open fire and thought the matter over. In this climactic hour he paused to review his life and works.

Vivid flashes of memory confused his efforts to keep his thoughts orderly. A tongue of flame licked around a log in the fireplace. A thread of scented smoke curled into the room. . . . A night in the Haitian jungle—when was it? Twenty—thirty years ago? A black wench was dying. "For no reason," the doctor said; "for superstition. Voodoo." . . . Marion Martin had been convincing. She had said that she was tired of young men—men whom she could not respect. She had said a man was not in his prime until sixty or seventy. Until then, he was callow, unproved, not worthy of admiration or love. He knew nothing of metropolitan people. He had been attracted to her and, presently, he had believed and loved her. . . . What was that about the natives destroying with such care every fingernail cutting, every hair? One had to be careful—voodoo was strong in the West Indies. . . . He had given Marion his honorable name

and a million dollars besides. Even if she hadn't pretended to love him, he might have done the same. She had given him the illusion of youth. He had thought of a future with her, for her. He might have lived for ever!

And now he was nothing but an old fool who was going to die. But so was she. Oh, yes, so was she!

The idea of following his wife to wherever she might come to rest and murdering her there never occurred to Jeremiah Van Orton. He was too tired and feeble for such a melodramatic rôle. One did not spend a lifetime in the Indies for nothing. He was clever; except for this little interlude of marriage, he had always been clever. He would find a way, a good way—a safe way for him, an unpleasant way for her.

Jeremiah Van Orton could always think better among his beautiful collection of paintings. He went to the drawing-room and drew up a chair before a Hobbema landscape. There he remained until he had planned all the details of his vengeance.

IN THE restaurant of the Hotel Lafayette, Michael Bonze sat across the table from his friend, Pierre Vanneau, and cursed the age in which they both were born.

"What does art mean in the Twentieth Century?" he asked rhetorically. "Nothing! People talk about the dynamic beauty of a new stream-lined toilet seat or the Empire State Building. Or take Surrealism: daubs—damn it!—daubs by clumsy, color-blind house-painters! Picasso eats while I starve! Cocteau is the white-haired boy while I worry myself bald! People don't want things to look like what they are—they want them to look like the sublimation of the mood of the essence of the psychological reaction

to what they might be if they weren't what they are. Oh, I know it sounds like sour grapes, but I wouldn't mind if it weren't for the fact that I'm a painter with greater talent than any of them. If I were living in Henry the Eighth's time, people would now be collecting Bonzes instead of Holbeins. Damn the Twentieth Century!"

"Look," said Vanneau, "have you ever painted a beautiful young girl? You know—curves and flowing hair and so on?"

Bonze slapped his big hand down on the table top and the dishes jumped. "Are you trying to be insulting?" he belellowed. "Do you take me for Henry Clive?—or—or Zuloaga, maybe? No! No, I haven't painted any pretty valentines of beautiful young girls!"

Vanneau murmured into his coffee cup, "Rubens did. Tiepolo did. Titian did. . . ."

"Oh, shut up!" said Bonze. "You know what I meant. People won't take that sort of thing from a modern artist—it isn't art. Art is old, wrinkled-up men, or nauseous arrangements of dried fish and rotten apples, or anything sufficiently ugly and nasty."

"How do you know that is so?" Vanneau asked. "What modern artist has dared to paint a *pretty* picture? I don't know of anyone since Greuze, and his picture sold well enough."

"Well—" Bonze began doubtfully. "And look," Vanneau continued, "in this jaded age, sex appeal is important. Important? It is everything!" He spread out his arms in an all-embracing gesture. "And what do you create for an avid public? A public that waters at the mouth at the very mention of nudism or Mae West? You give them old men and dried fish! Don't weep on *my* shoulder—you give me a pain!"

Bonze was still feeling a little sorry for himself. "I give Meyergold, the critic, a pain, too. Today, he came to the studio and said he didn't think I was ready, just yet, to have a show. He stayed about fifteen minutes. Damn him!"

ON THE morning following his wife's departure, Jeremiah Van Orton engaged the services of a Mr. Moses Winkler, a student of biology, who was promised double payment if he could manage to get through his work without asking questions. He was led into a lady's boudoir and told that he must go over the entire room with a microscope in order to collect every human remain, no matter how small or apparently unimportant.

Mr. Van Orton watched every move he made. Somehow, Moses did not like the eagerness with which the old man greeted each new find. It made him quite nervous.

When Moses finished his work he was able to deliver to his employer a surprising number of small envelopes, on each of which he had written a description of the contents. One held grains of dust from a nail-file; another, an eyelash. On a brush in the bathroom he had found a few flakes of skin. A minute drop of blood had been discovered on a handkerchief in the laundry basket. . . . The list went on.

Moses was paid and dismissed. He was glad to go.

Van Orton added the envelopes to a collection he had made of all the photographs of his wife that she had left in the house. He looked long at the relics before locking them safely away.

"It is not a great deal," he muttered to himself, "but in Haiti I've known them to do it with less—much less."

WITHIN a month, old Mr. Van Orton had become the scandal of Sutton Place. Every day, from nine until six, a constant stream of handsome young women entered and left his house. Much to Gorham's bewilderment and disapproval, it had become his master's custom to sit in the drawing-room and interview the young ladies, one by one. Discreet inquiries elicited the fact that they were artists' models answering a newspaper advertisement.

"What," Gorham had asked the cook, "does the old reprobate want with a model? And if he wants a model, why is he so hard to satisfy? He must have seen two hundred of them already and he's not kept one over ten minutes."

It was the cook's considered opinion that Jeremiah Van Orton was an indecent, dirty old man who should be put away where he couldn't do any harm.

The procession of applicants ended when Gilda Ransome was ushered into the drawing-room. Gorham was called and told that no more models would be seen. He breathed a sigh of relief and stole a glance at the young lady who had been chosen from among so many. Gorham had a shock—for a second he had thought she was Mrs. Van Orton. It was a startling resemblance.

MICHAEL BONZE sat in his studio window and looked at the dreary square with bare trees and muddy streets. It was a picture of his mood. His money was running low and he was thinking that he ought to be putting in a stock of canned baked beans instead of buying a half-case of gin. There was nothing he wanted to paint. He hated painting and art patrons and critics.

A sedate foreign limousine came splashing along the street below and stopped at the door to his studio building.

The sight didn't make him any happier. "Art patron!" he said with a wealth of expression in his voice.

In a moment there was a knock on the door, and Michael opened it to admit Jeremiah Van Orton.

"You are Michael Bonze?" he asked.

Bonze admitted his identity, although, just then, he was not particularly proud of it. The caller presented his card with the question, "You have heard of me?"

"Yes," said Bonze; "I've heard you have quite a large collection of Flemish paintings. Will you take a chair?"

Van Orton launched into his business at once. "I have come to see you," he said, "because I want a special kind of painting which you do better than anyone I know."

"Thank you!" Michael murmured and crossed his fingers behind him.

"Not that I like the sort of painting you do," the old man continued, "on the contrary, I dislike it intensely. It is dull, spiritless—I might say, insipid."

"Oh, do say 'insipid'!" said Michael. "Also say 'goodbye,' sir, at once!"

"Come, come," said Van Orton, calmly. "This is no time for compliments. I am not here to discuss art but to make you a proposition which you will find highly beneficial, financially."

Bonze had a sudden vision of rows of canned baked beans, and he held his tongue.

"For a particular reason, which is none of your affair, I wish you to paint a life-size nude of a model I have selected. The pose makes very little difference, but I suggest that you have her reclining on a chaise-longue. For background you may use drapery or anything you please—it is of no importance."

Bonze asked, "Would you mind telling me why I should have been chosen for this work?"

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"Because your painting is so realistically accurate that not even a colored photograph can compare with it. I don't consider it art, but it will serve my purpose."

After all, a man had to have some pride. "I'm not interested," said Bonze.

No shade of disappointment crossed the old man's face. "No, no," he agreed, "of course not. But you would, perhaps, be interested in fifteen thousand dollars, a third payable now?"

Michael resisted an impulse to jump up and kiss the beneficent bald head. "Write the check and send me the model," he said. "I'll start today."

"Good!" said Van Orton. "But now I must lay down two important conditions. First, I will give you a number of photographs of a young woman who bears some resemblance to the model you will use. I want you to study the pictures very closely, because your painting must look more like them than like the model."

"But why," Michael protested, "why can't I simply paint a portrait of the subject of the photographs? It would be a lot more satisfactory and easier."

"If the job were as easy as that, I wouldn't be paying you fifteen thousand dollars." Van Orton reached in the pocket of his coat and withdrew ten or twelve little envelopes. "The second request that I must make is this," he continued. "Each of these packets contains a pinch of powder. They are plainly marked, 'hair, nails, skin, lips,' and so on. Now, when you mix your paints for these various details, you must add these powders as indicated. You are a man of honor?"

"Certainly!" said the very mystified painter.

"You will give me your word that this will be done according to my instructions?"

Michael nodded.

"Very well. Here is my check for five thousand dollars. Hurry your work as much as you can with safety and let me know the instant it is done." Van Orton went to the door. "I brought the model with me in the car. I will send her up with the photographs. Good day!"

Bonze collapsed into a chair as the door closed.

SPRING has come to Venice and the Piazza San Marco has a freshly washed and burnished look. Mrs. Van Orton sits at Florian's on the edge of the square, sipping a Pernod. She feels that God's in His Heaven and Life is Just a Bowl of Cherries.

Mrs. Van Orton has a figure that looks well in anything, but its effectiveness increases in inverse ratio with the amount of clothing she wears; hence, to some extent, Venice and the Lido. When she walks along the beach, this summer, the women will turn away and the men will turn toward her. The women will say, "Who is that doll-faced American in the daring bathing-costume?" The men are discreet on the Lido—they will say nothing. But they will look.

AND spring has come to Washington Square. The old trees are beginning to think about their Easter clothing. Probably they will decide that the well-dressed tree will wear a very light and delicate chartreuse. Feathers, too, may be worn.

Michael Bonze looked up from his painting. "Darling," he said, "you're the best work I've ever done. And you're just about finished."

"Thank goodness!" said Gilda Ransome. "May I move, now?"

"Go ahead," he said. "Get up and we'll make some coffee."

He put down his palette and brushes

and helped her into her kimono, kissing, as he did so, the back of her neck.

"I wonder," he said, "if I could have done such a good portrait if I hadn't fallen in love with you. I owe a lot to old Van Orton. If it hadn't been for him—and for Pierre Vanneau—"

"Why Pierre Vanneau?" she asked.

Michael smiled in memory of his annoyance. "It was he who first suggested that I paint beautiful women. I was furious."

"So shall I be," said Gilda, "if you dare to paint any woman but me."

"Never fear!" he laughed. "There will be no one but you. I'll paint you as everything from Medusa to the Virgin Mary."

"I *might* make a Medusa," said Gilda.

Later in the day, the picture was finished to the immense satisfaction of both artist and model.

The next morning Michael arose before Gilda was awake. He wanted to look at the portrait in the cold light of dawn. Without, he told himself, undue self-praise, he found it good—very good. Maybe it wasn't modern, maybe the style wasn't original, perhaps it wasn't spontaneous. But the draftsmanship, the color, the texture, the composition—that was all perfect. No one could deny it. It would take no violent stretch of the imagination to conceive the beautiful creature rising from her couch and stepping lightly down from the canvas to the floor.

Bonze thought it wasn't fair that this, his best work, was destined to be hung in a dark, lonely house, among a lot of gloomy Flemish paintings, for the exclusive pleasure of a solitary old Dutchman. After all, Art was for the masses. If Meyergold could see this, he'd sing a different tune. If it weren't for the money, he'd never let Van Orton have the picture

—the insulting old idiot! He wouldn't appreciate it, anyway. It wouldn't have made any difference to him if the picture had been good or bad. All he wanted was a likeness.

On the heels of this reflection, Bonze realized in a flash of inspiration how he could keep his picture. He would make a copy and give *that* to Van Orton. Naturally, it wouldn't be so good as the original, but what of that? He hadn't promised to deliver a masterpiece. Of course, there was the matter of those little packets of powder—he'd used it all in the original—but—well, it was silly, anyway.

He woke Gilda with a shout and told her his plan. "I'll have the thing finished by the end of the week. Then I'll get my check and we'll go right down to the City Hall and be married."

Gilda looked at the clock on the bed table. "Is this a nice hour to propose to a girl?" she groaned and pulled the covers over her head.

Whistling loudly and cheerfully, Michael started to work.

JEREMIAH VAN ORTON crouched before the likeness of his wife lying nude upon a chaise-longue. He had never seen her so. She had always kept him at arm's length. But now she was near—near enough to touch with the finger tips, or a long pin, or a keen-edged knife.

Though never for a moment did he take his mad gaze from the portrait, he did not neglect the task at which he worked. Methodically, he sharpened on a whetstone a number of efficient-looking probes and knives. The scrape of the steel and his panting breath were the only sounds in the darkened room. Incessantly, he moistened his opened lips with his tongue. His heart pounded in his ears.

Jeremiah knew that the excitement of

the execution was killing him, that he must hurry. He got to his feet and addressed the painting in a high, cracked voice.

"Marion," he said, "I hold your life in this image by virtue of your skin and blood. Do you understand? This is you!"

He tried the point of a blue steel probe against his thumb. His voice rose to a shriek.

"You are going to die, Marion, my love, wherever you are!"

His bloodshot eyes fixed themselves in a hypnotic stare as he approached the portrait. Great veins throbbed in his shriveled neck and temples.

"**E**XCELLENT!" said Mr. Meyergold. "Really excellent! I must say, my dear Bonze, you surprize me!"

He looked around with an expression frequently worn by owners of dogs that are able to sit up or shake hands. He assumed an air of patronizing pride. He reasoned that he had played an important part in the development of this young artist by his stern and uncompromising rejection, until now, of everything he had done. He turned again to the picture and nodded. Bonze was a good dog and it was no more than fair to throw him a bone—he had earned it. "Excellent!" he repeated. "What do you call it?"

"I call it," said Michael, racking his brain for a likely name, "I call it 'Naked Lady'."

Mr. Meyergold glanced up sharply. "Naked Lady." He rolled it around on his tongue. "Good! Oh, very good! A fine distinction. This is no ordinary nude; no allegorical Grecian goddess to whom a yard of drapery more or less makes no difference." He thought that an awfully good line for a review and decided to make a note of it the instant

he left. He laughed in appreciation of his wit. "Oh, no, this young lady is shy and embarrassed without her clothing." He went on enlarging the idea in the hope that he would hit upon another useful line. "Here you've caught a lady in a most undignified situation. I get the impression that your 'Naked Lady' is very much annoyed with us for looking at her."

IN HER cabin on the beach, Marion Van Orton was changing from her bathing-suit to an elaborate pair of pajamas. Suddenly she had a distinct impression that she was being observed. She jerked a bath-towel up to her chest and swung around. Apparently there was nothing to account for her fear. But she *knew* that someone was minutely examining her. Hurriedly, she pulled on her pajamas and ran from the cabin, fully expecting to surprize some rude man in the act of staring through a chink in the wall. There was no one near.

In spite of the heat of the day, she went back into the cabin and wrapped a heavy cloak tightly about her. Still the miserable feeling persisted.

"My goodness!" she said to herself, "I feel positively naked!"

AMONTHER later, Marion Van Orton had a cause to remember that day on the Lido. She was sitting in the Excelsior Bar, reading a *New York Times*, two weeks old. She had really been looking through it to see if there were any more news of the death of her husband. For a few days the papers had been full of "Millionaire Husband of Actress Found Dead." When she had first heard of it she had wondered which of the paintings

it was that had been found slashed to rags and tatters, and she wondered what had happened before his heart failed that had made him want to ruin one of the pictures of which he had always been so proud.

There was nothing more in the *Times*. The story had been squeezed dry and dropped in favor of an expedition to the South Pole. Finishing a rather dull announcement of the forthcoming exhibit of paintings by an artist who had just married his model, Marion turned to her handsome companion.

"Some people insist," she said, "that more important things happen in New York than here, or anywhere else. But look at this paper; there isn't an interesting or important thing in it. It's all too, too boring for words."

And then, quite suddenly, that awful nightmarish feeling returned to her. She was entirely naked and people were looking at her, criticizing her, appraising her. As she crossed her arms at her throat, her eyes darted about the room, searching for the guilty Peeping Tom. She could detect no one, but she knew, she *knew* that to someone her clothing was perfectly transparent.

Without excusing herself to her startled friend, Mrs. Van Orton jumped up and rushed to her room in the hotel. She locked and bolted the door. The sensation was growing stronger every moment. She pulled down the shades and turned off the light. But it was no better. She ran into the clothes closet and shut the door. Even there, there was no escape from the certain knowledge that she was bare and defenseless before a crowd. She drew the hanging dresses tightly around her and shrank into a corner of the closet. She felt she was going mad.

