

# November Joe

The Detective of the Woods.

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November made ready to take up again Miss Virginia's trail. "We'll start, Mr. Quaritch, just where I found that bit of gold caught in a branch that hangs over the little stream up above there. You see, she lost her hat, and she has a splendid lot of hair, and so when I could find no tracks, for they came down the bed of the stream, I searched about as high as her head. I guessed she'd be liable to catch her hair in a branch."

But we had hardly started when we heard the voice of Planx roaring in the wood below us. He was coming along at an extraordinary pace in spite of his ungainly, rolling stride. "You were right, Joe, Virginia is alive!" It is a case of abduction. See what I have here."

He held a long stick or wand in his hand. The top of the wand was roughly split, and a scrap of paper stuck in the cleft. "Ed's just found this in the canoe on the lake," he went on. "These blackguards must have come back in the night and put it there."

"What have they said in the paper?" asked November. "You must pay to get your daughter back. If you want our terms come to the old log camp on Black lake tomorrow night. No tricks. We have you rounded up sure. Don't try to track us or we will make it bad for her."

Joe touched the ends of the wand. "Green spruce wood, cut near their camp," said he. "There's plenty of spruce like that right here," objected Planx, "why do you say it was cut near their camp?"

"It's cut and split with a heavy ax, such as no man ever carries about with him. Well, we'd best do no more tracking till we see the chaps that has Miss Virginia. It's Black lake tonight, then?"

On the way Planx made known to us his plan of campaign. It was a simple one. He would get the men into the hut and speak them fair till a favorable moment presented itself, when he would demand the surrender of his daughter under threat of shooting the kidnapers if they refused or demurred.

"There are three of us, and we can fix them easy," said Planx. November Joe shook his head. "They're not near such big fools as you think them," he remarked. We had stopped on some high ground in the shelter of the woods, from which we could see the fishing hut. Joe van-

ished with his silent, Indian-like glide, his movements as inaudible as those of a ghost. In about five minutes a light suddenly sprang up in the hut, and Joe's voice called us.

As we entered the door I saw Joe was pointing to a piece of paper which lay on the rough hewn table.

"The same writing as before. Listen to this: 'If you will swear to give us safe conduct we will come to talk it out. If you agree to this wave the lantern three times on the lake shore, and that will mean you give your oath to let us come and go freely.'"

"I told you they were not fools," said Joe. "What's the orders now, Mr. Planx?"

## CHAPTER IX.

"Come in, dear Joe."

OUR visitors hesitated outside the door. "There are only two of them," whispered Planx.

As he spoke a short, bearded man in a thick overcoat stepped into the light, followed by a tall and strongly built companion. Both wore black visor masks, with fringe covering the mouth. I noticed they were shod in moccasins.

"Evening," said the tall man, who was throughout the spokesman. "My partner and me is come to make you an offer, Mr. Planx. We've got your daughter where you'll never find her, where you'd never dream of looking for her."

"Don't be too sure of that," growled Planx. "If we agree on a bargain she shall be returned to you unharmed three days from the time the price is paid over, and that price is \$100,000."

"Those are our terms. The question for you is do you want your daughter or do you not?" "The next incident was as swift as it was unexpected. "I conjecture that is something of an easy question to answer," said Planx in his slow tones. "In fact, I—"

On the word he slipped out a revolver. But quick as was Planx's hand to carry out the impulse of his brain, Joe's was quicker. He knocked the revolver from Planx's grasp.

"You treacherous dog, Planx!" cried the kidnapers. "Is that how you keep faith? Well, we have a reply to that too. We offered to give up the girl for \$100,000, now we make the price \$150,000!"

"I'll never pay a cent of it!" shouted Planx. "When you come to change your mind," replied the kidnapers quietly, "just hang a white handkerchief on one of the trees at the edge of this wood. Then put the money in notes in that tin on the shelf. Leave us two clear days and you'll get your girl back safe. But if you monkey it will be the worse for her."

Without more words the two masked men left the hut, and like the explosion of a thunderstorm, Planx opened upon Joe.

November faced the storm with an entirely placid aspect until I began to wonder at his patience. But when at last he spoke the other fell dumb as if Joe had struck him.

"That's settled, Mr. Planx. You've done with me and I've done with you. Now quiet down and out!"

November opened his lips as if to speak, but, seeing Joe's face, he changed his mind and rushed from us into the darkness.

At once Joe put out the light. "We can't trust Planx just at the moment. He's fair mad, but we'll have him back in half an hour to show him the way back to Wilshire's," he remarked with a chuckle.

And in fact this was exactly what happened. It was a subdued but still a very resentful Planx whom we escorted through the dark woods. On our way back to our camp Joe made a detour to examine the tracks of the kidnapers by the light of the lantern which he had carried with him.

As had been the case by Mooseshank lake, so now we found the trails very clear near the waterside. Joe studied them for a long time. "Well, you're out of it now, at any rate," said I.

"And what about my promise to Calvey?" he rejoined. "I'm deeper in it than ever. I've got to find Miss Virginia sure."

"You can't track her because of that threat in the letter to Planx?" "That's so, but I'll be speaking to Miss Virginia before tomorrow night," said Joe quietly, not having made this dramatic announcement, would he say more.

The next morning Joe was early astir. "What are you going to do today?" said I. "I'm going to find out the name of the man that has Miss Virginia hid away. If you'll wait here, Mr. Quaritch, I'll come back as soon as I've done it. You've got your rod and there's plenty of fish in the lake."

"She was under their rifles and had to do exactly what she was ordered. Found her tracks to that little waterfall, stream, and it was there I found the golden hair. So far you see, every thing fitted in together as good as the jaws of a trap, and the message on the bit of paper about a ransom carried it further on. So did the talk we had with Harper; it must have been him did the speaking at Black lake. When I knocked up Planx's revolver I was wonderful sorry to have to do it, but a promise is a promise and he'd passed his sword for a safe conduct. After, when my eyes fell upon the trail left by Harper's partner, I knew I never done a better act in my life. It gave me a start. I can tell you, Mr. Quaritch. You see, all the weight was in the middle of the moccasin. The heels and toes were hardly marked at all."

November looked at me as if expecting me to see the meaning of this peculiarity, but I shook my head. "It meant that the foot inside the moccasin was a very little one, a good bit shorter than the moccasin."

"You can't mean?" I began. "Yes," said Joe. "The second person at Black lake wasn't a man at all, but just Miss Virginia herself."

"Well, if that was so, why, she had the game in her hands then. She had only to appeal to us to speak."

Joe interrupted me. "Here's another sort of game. You see, I'm pretty sure that Miss Virginia has kidnaped herself, or, at any rate, consented to be kidnaped. She had just paid tied round and joined the two men later, and then when I come to think over it careful I saw how I might raise the name of the man that was helping her. I lit out for Wilshire's camp and asked the woman if there was anything of Miss Virginia's missing from her room. She said there wasn't. Then I saw my way a bit. I was in the woods with Miss Virginia last year, and I know she's mighty particular about personal things. I don't believe she could live a day without a sponge and a comb and, most of all, without a toothbrush. None of them high toned gals can. Isn't that so?"

"Yes, that is so, but—" "Well," went on November, "if she went of her own free will, as I was thinking she did—or else why did she come to Black lake?—if, as I say, I was right in my notion and she'd made out the plans and kidnaped herself, the man who was with her would be only just her servant, in a manner of speaking. And I was certain that one of the first things she'd do would be to send him to some store to buy the things she wanted most. She couldn't get her own from Planx's camp without giving herself away, so she was bound to send Hank to hike out new ones from somewhere."

"What happened then?" "I started in on the stores round about this country, and with luck I stepped into the big store at Lavette and asked if any one had been buying truck of that kind. They told me Hank Harper. I asked just what. They said a hairbrush, a comb, a couple of toothbrushes and some other gear. That was enough for me. They weren't for Mrs. Hank, who's a halfbreed woman and don't always remember to clean herself of Saturdays."

"I see," said I. "The things were bought yesterday, so it all fits in, and there's no more left to find out but why Miss Virginia acted the way she has, and that we'll know before tomorrow."

It was well on toward 10 o'clock that night before we reached Harper's cabin on Otter brook. At first we knocked and knocked in vain, but at length a gruff voice demanded angrily what we wanted.

"Tell Miss Virginia Planx that November Joe would like a word or two with her."

"Are you drunk," shouted the man, "or only crazy?" "I've tracked her down fair and square, and I've got to see her."

"I tell you she isn't here."

"Let me in to make sure for myself."

"If a man comes to my door with a threat I'll meet him with my rifle in my hand. So you're warned," came from the cabin.

"All right, then. I'll start back to report to Mr. Planx."

On the words the door opened and a vivid, appealing face looked out. "Come in, dear Joe," said a honeyed voice.

"Thank you, Miss Virginia, I will," said Joe.

We entered. A lamp and the fire lit up the interior of a poor trapper's cabin and lit up also the tall, slim form of Miss Virginia Planx. She wore a buckskin hunting shirt belted in to her waist, and her glorious hair hung down her back in a thick and heavy plait. She held out her hand to Joe with one of the sweetest smiles I have ever seen or dreamed of.

him. Why, he's fifty by the look of him, and I'd much rather drown my self than marry him."

"There's younger and better looking boys around, I surmise. Miss Virginia?" returned November meaningly. "Virginia flushed a lovely red. "Why Joe, it's no use blinding you, for you remember Walter Calvey, don't you?"

"Sure! So it's him. That's good. But I heard he was out of his business," said Joe with apparent simplicity.

"I must tell you all or you won't understand what I did or why I did it. My father ruined Walter, because that would anyhow put off our marriage. Then when the Scheepers affair came on, and he gave me no rest, I could no stand it any longer. You see, he is so



clever he would pay all my bills, no matter how heavy, but he never let me have more than \$5 in my pocket, so that I was helpless. I could never see Walter, nor could I hear from him, and all the time Scheepers was given the run of the house."

November was audibly sympathetic, and so was I.

"Then one day this notion came to me. I planned it all out and got Hank to help. I'd have asked you, dear Joe, if you'd been there. Come now, Joe, you must see how good a pupil I was to you and how much I remember of your tracking, which I used to both er you to teach me."

"You're right smart at it, Miss Virginia!"

"I arranged the broken rod, and Hank and his brother carried me to the canoe. Then they got out on the other side of the lake, and I paddled up near to the rock by the waterfall to put the police or whoever should be sent after me off my trail. I'm real hurt I didn't deceive you, Joe."

"But you did right through—till you come to Black lake," Joe assured her.

"But you did not recognize me then?" she cried. "And I'd put on a pair of Hank's moccasins to make big tracks!"

November explained and added the story of his dismissal by Planx.

"Well, it's lucky you were there, any how, or we'd have had poor Hank shot. That fixed me in my determination to get the money. I want it for Walter. I want to make up to him for all that my father has made him lose."

"So Mr. Calvey is in this too?" said Joe in a queer voice.

"If you mean that he knows anything about it, you're absolutely wrong!" exclaimed Virginia passionately. "If he knew, do you think he'd ever take the money? It's going to be sent to him without any name or clue as to where it comes from. Walter is as straight a man as yourself, November Joe!" she added proudly. "You know him and yet you suspected him?"

"I didn't say I did. I was asking for information," said Joe submissively. "But you haven't got the money yet."

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