

November Joe

The Detective of the Woods

By HESKETH PRICHARD

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CHAPTER VIII.

The Case of Miss Virginia Planx.

NOVEMBER JOE and I had been following a mouse since day-break, moving without speech. Suddenly from somewhere ahead there broke out the sound of two shots and after a minute of two more.

"Two shots going out at steady intervals," said Joe. "That's a call for help. They're going again. We'd best follow them up."

We traveled for half an hour, guided by the sound, and came in sight of a man standing among the trees. We saw him raise his rifle and fire twice straight upward to the sky.

"It's a hawk," said Joe in surprise. "What the millionaire you went into the woods with to hunt timber last year?"

"The identical man," said Joe. "As we approached Joe halted him. Planx was a thick shouldered, stout man, his big body set back upon his legs, his chin thrust forward in a way that indicated the arrogance of his lightning lips and eyes.

"Ho! It's you, Joe!" he cried. "Yes, Mr. Planx."

"That's lucky, for I need your help. My daughter was murdered yesterday. The words made me gasp, and not me only.

"Miss Virginia?" cried Joe. "You can't mean that. Nobody would be foolish enough to kill Miss Virginia!"

As we walked Planx gave us the following facts: It appeared that he had been spending the last two weeks in a log hut which had been built by a friend, Mr. Wilshire. His household consisted of one servant—the daughter's nurse, a middle-aged woman whom they had brought with them from New York—two ladies and a man cook. On the previous day Miss Virginia had taken her red after lunch, as she had often done before, and come off to the river to fish.

"At 5 I went to join her. She was not there. Her red lay broken, and there were signs of a struggle and the tracks of two men. I started for Ed, the old guide. He came running down, and we took up the trail. It led us straight over to Mooseshank lake. The ruffians had left her in our own canoe and gone out on the lake."

"Planx paused and presently continued: "We went round the lake and found on the far side the spot where they had beached the canoe. Lending up into the woods from that point, we again struck the trail of the two men, but my daughter was no longer with them. When they left the canoe they were going light. They must have drowned her in the lake. It's clear enough. Presently I saw something floating on the water. It was her hat."

"Had Miss Virginia any jewelry on her?" asked Joe.

"A watch and a necklace."

"What value?"

"Seven or eight hundred dollars."

"Huh," said November reflectively. "And what did you do after finding her hat?"

"We trailed the two villains until they got on to some rocky ground. It was too dark then to do more, so we returned. Five thousand dollars if you lay hands on them," he said.

By the river the traces were so plain that any one could read them—the slender feet of the victim and the larger footprints of the two men. The fishing rod, snapped off toward the top of the middle joint, had been left where it had fallen. It seemed as if the girl had tried to defend herself with it. Next we went to the lake.

November literally nosed his way along. The moose tracks of the two men showed faintly here and there on the softer parts of the ground.

"Looks as if they were totting something," said Joe. "They must 'a' carried her. Stop! They set her down here for a spell."

Another moment brought us over the rise and in sight of Mooseshank lake. I halted involuntarily. The place seemed created for the scene of a tragedy.

November had pushed on to the spot where footprints and other signs showed where the men had entered the canoe. The deep side of a moose track in the mud seemed to tell of the effort it required to get the girl embarked.

"They took her out on the lake and murdered her!" groaned Planx. "Dragging? There's no use dragging, that water goes plumb down to the root of the world."

After that we went around to the other side of the lake and saw the beached canoe. The two sets of moose tracks showed clearly on the strip of mud by the water, but were soon lost in the tumbled debris of a two-year-old stony landslide over which trailing appeared quite impossible. November was busy about this landing place for a longer time than I expected, then he crossed the landslide at

right angles and disappeared from our view. Soon he came hurrying toward us.

"She isn't dead."

"What?"

"Anyways, she wasn't when she passed here. I have a proof here that you will think mighty good." He drew out a little leather case. I had given him and extracted from it a long hair of a beautiful red gold color. "Look at that! I found it in the spruces above there."

Planx took it gently in his great fingers. He was visibly much moved. For a few seconds he held it without speaking, then, "That grow on Virginia's head, sure enough, Joe. Is it possible my girl is alive?"

"She is, sure! Don't be afeared. You'll soon have news of her. I can promise you that, Mr. Planx. This wasn't no case of murder. It's just an abduction. They'd never be such fools as to kill her. They're eager than that. Isn't she your daughter? They'll hold her to big ransom. That's their game."

An ugly look came into Planx's eyes. "That's their game, is it? I'm not a man that it is easy to milk dollars from," said he.

By this time it was growing too dark for Joe to work any longer. We crossed the lake with Planx, and that night Joe and I camped near the end of Mooseshank lake, where a stream flowed from it.

At dawn, while we were having breakfast, Joe stood up and stared into the trees that grew thick behind us. As he called out I looked back and saw the indistinct figure of a man in their shadow watching us. He beckoned, and we approached him. I saw he was young, with a pale face and rather shabby town-made clothes.

"Don't you remember Walter Calvey, November?" he said, holding out his hand. "I was with you and Mr. Planx—and—her last year in the woods?"

"Huh, yes, and what are you doing here, Mr. Calvey?" asked Joe, shaking hands.

"I heard about Virginia. How could I keep away after that?" exclaimed Calvey.

"You've no cause to fret yet," said Joe.

"What? When they've killed her! I'll go with you and if we can find those—"

"Huh! She's not dead! Take my word for it!" Joe's gray eyes gave me a roguish look. "Why, I've got a thing here in my pocketbook you'd give me \$100 for!" He held the red gold hair up to the light of the rising sun.

Calvey shook from head to foot. "Virginia! You couldn't find her match in Canada! Tell me!"

"I can't wait to tell you and you can't wait to hear. Light out now. Old man Planx could make it unhealthily for you."

"You're right! He hates me because Virginia won't marry Schelberg of the combine. He hasn't let me see for months. And more than that, he's ruined me and my partner in business. It was easy for a rich man to do that," added Calvey bitterly.

"You go and start into business again," advised Joe. "I'll send you word first thing I know for certain."

But it was some time before he could induce Calvey to leave us. After he had gone I wondered whether Joe suspected him of having a hand in spirit-laying away Virginia. Presently I asked him.

Joe shook his head. "He couldn't have done it if he wanted to. He's a good young chap, but look at his boots and his clothes—he was bred on a pavement, but he's Miss Virginia's choice for all that. We'll start now, 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 their fair fill, 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-

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, nor, 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 red and there's plenty of fish in the lake."

With that I had to be content. Before starting Joe had laid a bet with me that he would come back with the name of his abductor, and I was wondering what else he had to go upon. Hardly any that I could think of—the trail of the two men and the golden hair, very little more.

About 2 o'clock I heard November call me.

"What about the bet?" I called on sight of him. "Who pays?"

"You pay, Mr. Quaritch," said Joe. "Why, who is it, then?"

"A fellow called Hank Harper."

"Why, I've heard of him. He passes for a man of high character."

Joe laughed. "All the same, he's the chap who done it," said he. "I expect he's got her up at his cabin on Otter brook."

"Look here, November," I said. "You tell me Hank Harper is in the kidnaping business and I believe you, because I've never known you speak without solid facts behind you. But I think you owe me the whole yarn."

Joe pulled out his pipe. "All right, Mr. Quaritch. To begin at the beginning. There are two of them. One's this man Harper. I don't know who the other is, and it don't much matter if we find Harper we find his partner. Well, Miss Virginia was fishing when they stole down upon her and carried her off. I've already told you what happened until they took to the canoe. They paddled across the lake and the two men got out, leaving Miss Virginia in the canoe to paddle herself round and land elsewhere."

"But surely she could have escaped!" I cried.

"She was under their rifles and had to do exactly what she was ordered. I found where she landed and followed her tracks to that little waterfall stream, and it was there I found the golden hair. So far, you see, everything 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 word 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 give me a start, I can tell you, Mr. Quaritch! You see, all the weight was in the middle of the moose track. 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 moose track was a very little one, a good bit shorter than the moose's."

"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 Joe interrupted me. "Hers was an other sort of game. You see, I'm pretty sure that Miss Virginia has kidnapped herself, or, at any rate, consented to be kidnapped. She had just paddled 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 kidnapped 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 track 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 hairbored 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.

"You're not going to give me away, dear Joe, are you?" said she.

"You've given yourself away, haven't you, Miss Virginia?"

Virginia Planx looked him in the eyes, then she laughed. "I see that I haven't, but can I speak before this gentleman?"

Joe hesitated to vouch for my discretion, while Hank Harper nursed his rifle and glowered from the background, where also one could discern the dark face of the half breed squaw. But Miss Virginia showed her complete command of the situation.

"Coffee for these two, please, Mrs. Harper," she cried, and while we were drinking it she told us her story.

"You maybe heard of old Mr. Schelberg of the combine?" she began. "My father wanted to force me to marry him. Why, he's fifty by the look of him, and I'd much rather drown myself than marry him."

"There's younger and better looking boys around, I suppose, Miss Virginia?" returned November meaningly.

Virginia flushed a lovely red. "Why, Joe, he's no use blinding you, for you remember Walter Calvey, don't you?"

"Good! 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 Schelberg affair came on and he gave me no rest I could not 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 Schelberg 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

and how much I telegraphed of your tracking, which I used to both of you to teach me."

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

"I arranged the broken red, 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—fill 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, anyhow, 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."

"No! But I'll get it in time."

And in the end Miss Virginia triumphed. She received her ransom in full, and it is to be doubted if Mr. Planx ever had an idea of the trick played on him. And I'm inclined to think Mr. Walter Calvey is still in the dark, too, as to the identity of his runaway friend. But two things are certain—Mrs. Virginia Calvey is a hot young woman, and Hank Harper is a dating on a nice 200-acre farm for which he pays no rent.

(To Be Continued.)

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