

# November Joe

## The Detective of the Woods

By HESKETH PRICHARD

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CHAPTER XIII. The Looted Island.

It was a clear night, bright with stars. Joe and I were sitting by our campfire near one of the fjords of western Alaska, where we had gone on a hunting expedition after the great moose of the west.

I was talking when suddenly Joe touched me.

"Shsh!" he whispered. "There's some teller moving down by the creek."

We waited, and I was soon aware of a figure advancing through the night.

Then a voice said, "Fine night, mates," and a slender, long-armed fellow with a shiny red beard stepped into the circle of light.

"The cold makes you keep your hands in your pockets, don't it?" said Joe gently. "It does me."

I then noticed that both men were covering each other with revolvers through their pockets. The stranger slowly drew out his hand.

"I'm John Stafford."

"This here is Mr. Quaritch of Quebec, I'm his guide. We're come after big game."

"I guess you're speaking truth. It's up to me to apologize. I'm free to own I was doubtful about you. You'll understand that when I tell you what's happened. Perhaps you've noticed an island about eight miles off the coast, lying north-west?"

"Sort of leaf shaped island? Yes."

"That's where I come from—Eel Island. I have a fox farm there. I returned to it yesterday after a run down to Valdez. When I went away a fortnight ago I left my man in charge of some of the finest black foxes between this and Umanva. I got back to find the foxes all killed and my hired man gone—disappeared."

"Who was he?"

"An Aleut, called Sam. He's been in my employ three years. I see what you're thinking—that he killed the foxes, and I'd have thought that myself, only I know he didn't."

"How's that?"

"One reason is that I own only one boat, and when I went to the mainland last Friday week I took it, leaving Sam on the island. It's all of seven miles from the coast, so he couldn't have got away if he wanted. That I say, is one reason why it couldn't have been him. The other reason's no good. I was deceived away so cleverly. Here's the letter that did it."

"Your wife wants you to come down at once. She's due for an operation in the hospital here on Friday week, and she's had put to it to plan for the children till she gets about again. So you'd best come. Yours truly,

S. MACFARLANE (Doctor)."

I gave him back the letter. "Any man would have gone on such news," I said.

"Well, I did," said Stafford savagely. "I got that letter twelve days back and off I went hot foot, leaving Aleut Sam in charge. It took me a week going down. When I reached the house where my wife is living, she was surprised to see me, and I showed her the letter. You can guess. It was all a plant! There wasn't any Dr. Macfarlane, nor any operation, and back I came—record breaking travel—to Eel Island. I found the place clean gutted. All the blacks and silvers caught and killed, and the skinned carcasses lying around. And Aleut Sam vanished as if he had never lived. It may have been done for spite, but whoever he was he lived in my cabin several days, and slept in my bunk. I wonder what he did with Sam. Knocked him on the head and heaved him in the sea like as not. I'm high desperate. The work of three years gone, three winters spent with Sam alone, like some kind of a Crusoe and his man Friday, and keeping my wife and two little girls down at Valdez."

"Look here, ain't it a bit early in the year to kill foxes?" said Joe, after a pause.

"They'd have been worth 25 per cent more in a month."

"Then why?"

"Because I couldn't have been deceived away except while the steamer was running before the winter closed down. See? Even as early as this in the year the pelts were worth \$15,000."

"My?" said Joe. "Suspect any one in particular?"

"I believe it may have been Trapper Simpson. He's had a down on me this good while back. Well, if it was him, he's paid me out good, the black-guard."

"Hard words don't bring down nor man nor deer," said Joe.

"There was a silence; then I said: "What would you give the man that discovered who it was robbed you?"

"If he didn't get me back my pelts I could give him nothing. If he did he'd be welcome to \$500," replied the fox farmer.

"Good enough, November?" I asked. Joe nodded.

"What do you mean?" asked Staff-

ford, turning to Joe. "You a trail reader?"

"Learnin' to be," said Joe.

Thus it was agreed that we should go across to Eel Island at dawn to let November have a look round. We went ashore, and Joe at once took a cast, looking for tracks, though he knew he was little likely to find any, for the ground was as hard as iron and had been impervious for days.

We next climbed to Stafford's cabin. "Come right in," said he.

"Wait," said Joe. "You told us the robber lived in here while he was on the island. If things is the way he left them I'd like to look round."

"Have your way," said Stafford. "I haven't disturbed them. I put off directly I saw your smoke, and I hadn't been long ashore."

Joe went in and examined everything with his usual swift care. He hit match after match and peered about the stove, for the interior of the cabin was pretty dark even in the daytime.

After this he bent over the table and, drawing his knife, scratched at a stain on the near side, and then at a similar stain upon the other.

"I'm through," he said at length. Stafford, who had been watching Joe's proceedings with an air of incredulity that bordered on derision, turned sharply to question him:

"Found out anything?"

"Not much," answered Joe.

"Well, all I can see is that the villain has eaten a good share of my grub."

"I dare say," said Joe. "There was two of them, you know."

"No, I don't! And what else can you tell me about them?"

"I think they was man and wife. She's a smallish woman, I'd guess she's maybe weakly, too. And he's fond of reading; anyway, he can read."

Stafford stared at November half suspiciously.

"What?" he shouted. "Are you kidding me? Or how did you get all that?"

"That's easy," replied November. "There are two or three traces of a little flat foot in front of the stove and a woman couldn't run this job on her own, so it's likely there was a man too."

Stafford grunted. "You said she was weakly?"

"I thought maybe she was, for if she hadn't split the water out of the kettle most times she took it off the stove there wouldn't be any track, and here is one near on top of the other, so it happened more'n once on the same spot. She found her kettle heavy, Mr. Stafford," Joe said seriously.

"I'm free to own that seems sense," acknowledged Stafford. "But the reading—that's different."

"Table's been pulled up alongside the bunk—see that scrape of the leg—and he's had the lamp close up alongside near the edge where the stain is. There's plenty of oil stains in the middle of the table, but these close to the edges ain't been long on. You can see that for yourself."

"By jingo!" said the fox farmer. "Anything else?"

"The chap what robbed you was a trapper all right and had killed a red fox recent, so recent he carried it across and skinned it here."

"Where?"

"By your stove." Joe bent down and picked up some short red hairs. "Clumsy skinning," said he. "Let's go out and take a look round the island."

Stafford led the way. At a short distance some of the skinned carcasses lay. Joe turned them over. Suddenly he bent down with that quick intention that I had learned to connect with his more important discoveries. From one he passed to another till he had handled every carcass. Stafford pointed out another island lying some five miles north, where, he told us, he kept his less valuable stock.

"There's a lot of red and cross foxes over there on Edith Island. It's named for my eldest gal," he said. "Whenever there happens a black one in the litters I try to catch it and bring it over here to Eel—Euloo! What's that?"

Stafford stood with his hands shading his eyes staring at Edith Island.

"Look! That's smoke or I'm dreaming," he cried.

A very faint line of bluish haze rose from the distant rock.

"That's it," said Joe.

"From the island is uninhabited. Come on, come on!" cried Stafford excitedly. "It may be those ruffians clearing out Edith Island too. We'll get after them."

"All right, Mr. Stafford," agreed Joe. "But I guess it's liable to be your Aleut Sam marooned over there."

"Why?"

"That's a signal fire. Whoever's made that fire is putting on moss. And I've noticed things here that make me think it ain't likely they killed Sam."

The wind served us fairly well, and as we ran under the lee of the land we were aware of a figure standing on the beach waiting for us.

"It's Aleut Sam, sure enough," said Stafford.

The Aleut proved to be a squat fellow of a most Mongolian cast of countenance. We rowed ashore in the canvas boat, and on the beach Stafford held a rapid conversation with his man in Indian. Neither Joe nor I could follow what was said, but presently Stafford enlightened us.

"Sam says that one night, four days after I left Eel Island, he had just eaten his supper when he heard a knocking on the door. Thinking it must be me who had returned, he opened it. Seeing no one, he stepped out into the dark, when a pair of arms were thrown round him, and a cloth that smelt like the stuff that made him go asleep in the hospital (Sam's had most of his toes off on account of frost-bite down to Valdez) was clamped

about his head. He struggled, but he says he does not remember any more until he woke up on the beach here. It was still dark, and the men and boat were gone.

"Toward evening he discovered a barrel of dried fish which had been tumbled ashore from the boat which marooned him—to keep him from starving, I suppose. He went up into the scrub and made a fire. Since then he's been here and seen no one. That's all."

"Then he didn't ever really see the faces of the chaps that kidnaped him?"

Stafford translated the question to Sam and repeated the answer.

"One had a beard and was a big man; he wore a peaked cap. Anything else to ask him?"

"Yes. How long has he been here on this island?"

"Eight days."

"What's he been doing all the time?"

"Just wandering around."

"Where has he been camped?"

Stafford raised his thumb over his shoulder. "In the scrub above here."

Joe nodded. "Well, let's go to his camping place and boil the kettle. He'll sure have a bit of fire there."

Joe stirred the smouldering logs into ash, but in doing so was so unfortunate as to overturn the kettle.

"That's bad," said he. "Best tell your man to get some more water."

Stafford sent off Sam on his errand; but no sooner had the Aleut disappeared than November was on his knees examining the charred embers and delving among the ashes.

"Got rid of your hired man for a while longer, only so he don't suspect anything," he said. "I hear him coming."

"You mean he's in the robbery?"

"He sure is. And what's more, it looks to me like he's your only chance of getting your foxes back. Here he comes."

A moment later Sam appeared in sight walking up the narrow track between the rocks, kettle in hand. Stafford spoke to him in Aleut. Sam grunted in acquiescence, and went off in the hill that formed the center of the island.

"I told him to go gather some more wood while the kettle's boiling. Now you can talk and tell me who you think has the pelts of my foxes."

"Your foxes ain't dead."

"Ain't dead? You've forgot their skinned carcasses?"

"I allow we saw some skinned carcasses, but they was the carcasses of red foxes worth no more than \$10 apiece instead of a thousand. I examined those carcasses mighty careful. Their eyes wasn't the right color for black foxes. That's one thing. For another, I found some red hairs. It ain't in nature you can take a pet off and not a hair stick on the body under."

Stafford digested this in silence.

"But why in creation should the chaps have taken the trouble to bring over red fox carcasses?" he inquired at length.

"That's easy answered. They was after your best stock. It's pretty likely they didn't take them far, and they wouldn't want you nosing about for your live foxes."

"Is that it?"

"Another thing. The robbers was six days or more on Eel Island. Now, they could catch and kill all your foxes in two. But to catch them so they wouldn't be hurt would take time. No, your foxes ain't dead yet, and they ain't far off, neither, and your Aleut knows who's got them. He told you he'd been eight days on this island, didn't he?"

Stafford nodded. "Eight days, that's what he said."

"He lied. I knew it the moment I set eyes on his fire. Not enough ash to this fire to make heat to keep a man without a blanket comfortable for eight days this weather. And look! The bungs he's broke off for his lead. They're too fresh. Ain't he ain't got no ax here, yet the charred ends of the thicker bits on the fire has been cut with an ax. It's clear as light. The robbers ferried Sam across here about two days back, cut some wood for him so he shouldn't be too cold, gave him grub to last till 'bout the time you'd likely be home and left him."

"I guess you're right. I see it now. I'm grateful to you."

Stafford reached for his rifle, but Joe intervened.

"Stay you still, and I'll show you the way we do in the lumber camps."

Sam's strong, squat figure advanced toward us. As he stooped to throw the wood he had brought on the ground Joe caught his shoulder with one hand and snatched the knife from his belt with the other. And then there flashed across the features of the Aleut an expression like a mad dog's. He flung himself, gasping and snarling, on November.

But he was in the grip of a man too strong for him, and though he returned again and again to the attack, the huge young woodsman twisted him to earth, where Stafford and I tied his struggling limbs.

This done we ruffed him over.

"Now," said Stafford, "who is it has got my foxes?"

The Aleut shook his head.

Stafford pulled out his revolver, opened the breech, made sure it was loaded and cocked it. Next he held his watch in front of Sam's face and pointed out the fact that it wanted but five minutes to the hour.

"Am telling him if he don't confess," he said. "I'll shoot him when the hand reaches the hour." He turned to us. "You'd best go."

"Good heavens! You don't really mean"—I cried.

Stafford winked. Joe and I went down to the beach below.

A quarter of an hour passed before

Stafford joined us. "What's happened?" I asked. "He's confessed, all right." Then Stafford looked at Joe. "It all went through just the way you said it."



"I'll shoot him when the hand reaches the hour."

was a rival fox farmer, Jurgensen, did it. Landed on Eel Island with his wife the night I left, they were there until two days ago; took them all their time and Sam's to get my foxes. Then they brought him over here."

And now I will leave out any account of the events of the next sixteen hours which we spent in the sluff and pick up the thread of this history again with Stafford knocking at the door of the Jurgensens' cabin on Upsala Island. We had landed there after dark.

Joe and I stood back while Stafford faced the door. It was thrown open, and a big gingerbread Swede demanded his business.

"I've just called around to take back my foxes," said Stafford.

"Vot foxes?"

"The blacks and silvers you stole."

"You are mad!"

"Shut it!" cried Stafford. "Ten days ago you and your wife, having decoyed me away to Valdez, went to Eel Island. You were there eight days, during which time you cleaned out every animal I owned on it. I know you didn't kill them, though you tried to make me believe you had by leaving the skinned carcasses of a lot of red foxes. Three days ago you left Eel Island."

As he spoke I saw the wizened figure of a woman squeezing out under the big Swede's elbow. She had a narrow face, with blinking, malevolent eyes, that she fixed on Stafford.

"Zot! Vot then?" jeered Jurgensen.

"Then you rowed over to Edith Island and marooned my man Aleut Sam, who was in the robbery with you."

The big Swede snatched up a rifle by the door and stepped out.

"Get out of here," he cried, "or—He peered on catching sight of Joe and myself."

"I'll go if you wish it," said Stafford indignantly, "but if I do I'll be to return with the police."

"And look here, Mr. Dutchman," broke in Joe gently, "if it comes to that you'll get put away for a fifteen years' rest cure, sure."

"Who are you?" bellowed Jurgensen.

"He's the man that told me your wife was weakly and spilled the water from the kettle when she lifted it, for he found her tracks at my place by the stove. He's the man that discovered ax cut log ends in Aleut Sam's fire on Edith Island when we knew Sam had no ax with him. He's the man I owe a lot to."

"Me also," said Jurgensen venomously as he bowed his head. "Vot you want—your terms?" he asked at last.

Stafford had his answer ready. "My own foxes—that's restoration—and two of yours by way of interest—that's retaliation."

"Ant if I say no?"

"You won't. Where's my foxes?"

Jurgensen hesitated, but clearly there could be only one decision in the circumstances. "I haf them in my kennels," he answered.

"Wire inclosures?" cried Stafford in disgust.

"Yes."

"You can't grow a decent pelt in a cage," snarled Stafford, with the eagerness of a fanatic mounted upon his hobby. "You must let them live their natural life as near as possible or their color suffers. The pigmentary glands get affected."

"'Troof! I haf read of all that in the book 'Zieatitic Selection of Color Forms.'"

"Yes," put in Joe. "You read a good bit while you were at Mr. Stafford's place, that's so—lying in Mr. Stafford's bunk."

Jurgensen raised startled eyes. "You see me?"

"No."

"How you know then?"

Joe laughed. "I guess the spiders must 'a' told me," said he.

(To Be Continued.)

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