

NOVEMBER JOE:
WOODSMAN DETECTIVE
The MYSTERY OF
FLETCHER BUCKMAN
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I WAS DOZING. It seemed deep in the night to me. The train that November Joe and I had boarded late the previous evening was passing, with a rattle and a roar, between the woods that flank the metals, when suddenly there came shriek upon shriek, such as mark the top note of grief and human horror. It was a woman's voice.

Upon the instant, the whole sleeping car awoke; half a dozen passengers sprang to the carpeted floor, surprise and consternation eloquent in their faces and attitudes.

"It's from that private car," cried some one. "Who's in it?"

A bearded man answered: "Fletcher Buckman and his wife."

"It was a woman's scream."

"We must see what's wrong."

The bearded man and two others ran down the corridor, only to meet the conductor, who stepped inside the door and confronted them squarely.

"There's murder doing. Here, let's pass!" they gasped.

The conductor's hard face checked them. "Bah! Mrs. Buckman's had a nightmare. That's all there's to it," he said roughly.

I knew that his words were mere invention. His next act made me even more certain; for he locked the door behind him, and walked quickly through the car, paying no attention to the babble of questions, remonstrance, incredulity and advice thrust upon him from all sides. A minute later, he reappeared with November Joe, who, scorning sleepers, was traveling in the car ahead.

As he passed, Joe whispered: "Come on!" We stepped out from the blaze of electricity into a cold white light of dawn, against which the massed trees on either side loomed black and wet as the train steamed forward.

On the open platform between the cars the conductor said a word to Joe: "I brought you along, November, because I want a witness, any way."

THEN WE passed into electricity again, as we entered the private car. I shall never forget the sight that met us. Across the door lay the figure of a woman; her face, showing out among folds of shining silk, was white as chalk, and though she had lost consciousness it was still drawn with terror. But my eyes flashed past her to the side of the car where, close to the bed-place, the body of a man was dangling, hung by the neck to a stout brass hook.

I could see that he was thin, with a drooping moustache, and outrageously bald. He lurched and swayed to the swaying of the train, but it was the dreadful white head bobbing stiffly that lent the last touch of horror. He was dressed in pink pajamas, and his bare heels beat a tattoo against the side boarding of the bunk.

In a second, we had cut him down; but as the rigid body sank its weight upon our arms, we knew that life must have left it some good while before.

"It's Fletch. Buckman, sure enough," said the conductor,

"and there's no hope for him. I reckon? . . . I haven't found a doc. on the cars; but we can get a couple of women to see to Mrs. Buckman. We'll start to carry her out of this right now, before she comes to."

The conductor and I raised her in our arms, and within ten minutes we had left her in kindly hands.

When we got back, Joe was still engrossed in his examination of the body. He put up his hand to warn us back as we appeared at the door.

"Wait a bit," he said. "You can talk from there. Steve; you were saying . . . ?"

THE CONDUCTOR took up the thread of the story he had been telling to Joe when he first called him: "As I was explaining to you, I heard the screech and looked in just as she dropped. I stepped over and got at Fletch; but I knew by the feel of him it was too late to try any reviving. Next, I went for you.

"She slept in the little compartment beyond, 'cause he always stayed up half the night working, and often slept in the bunk here like he did tonight," continued the conductor. "Guess it's suicide, Joe." He was leaning forward, and looking into the contorted dead face on the pillow of the bed.

"Perhaps!" said November abruptly, and passed into Mrs. Buckman's sleeping-room, from which a door opened to the rear platform of the car. While he was busy moving in and out, Steve, the conductor, went round making his own observations.

And here I may as well give a slight description of the car. It was not a large one; but it was comfortably fitted with a couple of armchairs and the



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"You were eavesdropping, were you?" Knowles snarled

bunk already mentioned. A rolled-up hammock for use in the hot weather was strapped against the paneling, and the hook which had upheld poor Buckman's body was intended for supporting one end of this hammock when slung. To the left, an office bureau with writing materials upon it; a typewriter, also, and an open leather bag containing folded papers. There were windows on both sides of the car; but while the one on the left was still shuttered, the glass of the opposite window was bare and showed the dark night-clouds sinking in the west.

STEVE UTTERED an exclamation; he was reading some words typed on a sheet of paper fixed in the machine. November, who was still standing by the side of the dead man, looked round. Steve crossed over to him.

"It's sure suicide," he said, "though what made him do it, and he already a millionaire and likely to be richer every day, beats me!"

"Suicide," repeated Joe softly. "Why suicide?"

"That's his own belt he was hung up with," replied Steve; "there's his name on to it. And better proof than that you'll find on the typewriter over there. You can read it for yourselves.

I joined Joe at the table. The upper part of the sheet of paper which was still in the machine held some nine or ten lines of a business letter; then, an inch or more below, a few words stood out upon the plain whiteness:

"Heaven help me! I can bear it no longer."

"That's the sort of slush they mostly write when they're waiting to jump off the edge of the world," remarked the conductor. "That settles it."

"That's so," said Joe, "only it was n't Buckman wrote that."

"Who else could it be?"

"The man that hanged him."

The conductor gave a snort of laughter. "Then, you surmise that some one came in here and hung Fletch. Buckman?"

"Just that."

"O' course Buckman consented to being hung!" jeered Steve.

"Buckman was dead before he was hanged!" said November.

"What's that you're saying?" cried Steve.

"If you examine the body," began Joe.

The conductor made a forward movement, but Joe caught his arm. "Let's see the soles of your boots before you get tramping about too much. Steady, hold on to the table. Now!"

He studied the upturned soles for a minute. "Huh!" said he. "Now, come over to the body. Look at the throat. There is the mark of the belt, but see here!" He indicated some roundish, livid bruises.



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"I tell you he was murdered, murdered!" she cried