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NOVEMBER JOE
The Detective of the Woods
by Hesketh Prichard.

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"Do the boys up at C know you've come to me?" he said.

"No, I thought it wiser they shouldn't." November remained silent for a moment.

"You'd best get away back, Mr. Close," he said at length. "I'll go down to Perkins' clearing, and have a look at the spot where the robbery took place, and then I'll find some excuse to take me to Camp C, when I can make my report to you."

To this Close agreed, and the two of us set out through the woods to the site of Dan Michaels' bivouac. The ashes of a fire and a few boughs made its scanty furnishings, and in neither did November take much interest. Forth and back he moved, apparently following lines of tracks which the drenching rain of the previous day had almost obliterated, until, indeed, after ten minutes, he gave it up.

"Well, well," said he, in his soft cadenced voice, "he always did have the luck."

"Who?"

"The robber. Look at last year! Got clear every time."

"The robbers," I corrected.

"There's but one," said he.

"Michaels mentioned two voices, and the man in the mask stepped into sight at the same moment as the fire glinted on the revolver of the other man in the bushes."

Without a word November led me to the farther side of the dead fire and parted the boughs of a spruce, which I had previously seen him examine. At a height of less than five feet from the ground one or two twigs were broken, and the bark had been rubbed near the trunk.

"He was a mighty interesting man, him with the revolver," November threw back his handsome head and laughed. "There was only one chap, and he fixed the revolver here in that fork. It was a good bluff he played on Dan, making him think there was two agin him! The rain's washed out most of the tracks, so we'll go up to Camp C and try our luck there. But first I'd better shoot a deer, and the boys'll think I only come to carry them some meat, as I often do when I kill anywhere nigh the camp."

As we made our way toward C, November found the tracks of a young buck which had crossed the tote road since the rain, and while I waited he slipped away like a shadow into the wild raspberry growth, returning twenty minutes later with the buck upon his shoulders.

On reaching Camp C November sold his deer to the cook, and then we went to the office. The men were all away at work, but we found the manager, to

November assented. "Guess we'll have to wait till another chap is held up," said he.

"You think they'll try their hand at it again?"

"Sure. Who'd stop after such success?"

"I'd be inclined to agree with you if it wasn't for the fact that the men won't leave singly now. They're scared to. A party of six started this afternoon. They were hoping they'd have the luck to meet the scoundrels and backing how they'd let daylight into them if they did. But of course they won't turn up—they'd be shy of such a big party."

"Maybe," said November. "With your permission, Mr. Close, me and Quaritch'll sleep here tonight."

"All right. But I can't attend to you. I'm behind with my accounts, and I must even them up if it takes all night."

"And there's one question I'd like to have an answer to. It's just this: How did the robber know that Dan Michaels was worth holding up? Or that he was going off on the spree? He must have been told by some one. Blackmask has got a friend in Camp C all right. That is, unless—"

"Aye, unless?" repeated the manager. But November would say no more.

An idea had come into his mind, but Close could not draw it from him; yet I could see he had entire trust in the taciturn young woodsman.

Next morning November seemed in no hurry to go, and shortly before the midday meal a party of half a dozen men rushed into the camp. They were all shouting at once, and it was impossible for a time to discover what the turmoil was about. Leaning against the wall of the bunkhouse, the silent November surveyed the clamoring knot of men with grim humor.

"I tell you again, we've been held up, robbed, cleaned out, the whole six of us!" yelled a short man with a sandy beard.

"That is true!" cried a fair haired Swede.

On this they all began shouting again, waving their arms and explaining. November advanced. "Look, boys, that's an easy, comfortable log over there!"

The Swede answered him with a snarl, but meeting November's eyes, thought better of it. Joe was the last person upon whom any one would would choose to fix a quarrel.

"I was suggesting, boys," continued November, "that there's the log handy, and if you'd each choose a soft spot and leave one to speak and the others listen till he's through with it we'd get at the facts. Every minute wasted gives them as robbed you the chance to get off clear."

"November's right," said a huge lumberman called Thompson. "Here's what happened. We six got our time yesterday morning, and after dinner we started off together. It were coming along dark when we camped in the old log hut of Tidson's bridge. Seein' what had happened to Dan, we agreed to keep a watch till dawn. First watch was Harry's. In an hour and a half he were to wake me. He never did. The sun were up before I woke, and there was all the others sleeping round me. I was wonderful surprised, but I took the kettle and was going down to fill her at the brook. It was then that I noticed my roll of bills was gone from my belt. I came running back. Harry woke, and when I told him he clutches at his belt and finds his money gone too. Then Chris, Bill Maver, Wedding Charlie and last of all Long Lars they wakes up, and danged if the lot of them hadn't been robbed same as us."

A unanimous groan verified the statement.

"We was tearing mad," went on the spokesman. "Then out we goes to search for the tracks of the thieves."

A look of despair crossed November's face. I knew he was thinking of the invaluable information the feet of the six victims must have blotted out forever.

"You found them?" inquired November.

"We did. They was plain enough," replied the big lumberman. "One man done it. He come up from the brook, did his business and went back to the water. He was a big, heavy chap with large feet, and he wore tanned cowhide boots patched on the right foot. There were seventeen nails in the heel of the right boot and fifteen in the other. How's that for tracking?"

"Hands up and no fooling!" whom November told his news. I noticed, however, he said nothing of his idea that there had been but one robber.

"That just spells total failure," remarked Close when he had finished.

CHAPTER V.
The Guilty Man.

THERE was no doubt about the fact that November was surprised. He said nothing for a full minute, then he looked up sharply.

"How many bottles of whisky had you?" said he.

"Nary one," answered Thompson. "There isn't one nearer than Lavalotte, as you well know. We wasn't drunk, we was drugged. We must 'a' been, though how it was done beats me. For we had nothing but bread and bacon and tea, and I made the tea myself."

"Where's the kettle?"

"We left that and the frying pan back at the hut, for we're going to hunt the country for the thief. You'll come along, Nov?"

"On my own condition, or I'll have nothing to do with it."

"What's it?"

"That nary a man of you goes back to Tidson's bridge hut till I give you leave."

"But we want to catch the robber."

"Very well. Go and try if you think you can do it."

An outburst of argument arose, but soon one and another began to say: "We'll leave it to you, Nov." "Mind you fetch my \$190 back for me, Nov." "Leave Nov alone." "Go on, Nov."

November laughed. "I suppose you all slept with your money on you?"

It appeared they all had, and Lars and Chris, who possessed pocketbooks, and found them flung, empty, in a corner of the hut.

"Well, Mr. Quaritch and me'll be getting along, boys. I'll let you know if I've any luck." Then suddenly November turned to the big spokesman and said, "By the way, Thompson, did you fill that kettle at the brook before you found you'd lost your cash?"

"No; I run right back."

"That's lucky," said November, and we walked away in a roar of shouted questions to the canoe placed at our disposal by Close. By water we could run down to Tidson's bridge in an hour or two.

"Do you think this is the work of the same man that held up Dan Michaels?"

"Guess so. Can't be sure. The ground's fine and soft, and we ought to get the answer to a good many questions down there."

Thanks to the canoe and a short cut known to November, we arrived at our destination in admirable time.

First of all, skirting the path, we went to the hut where the six had slept. A few articles dropped from the hastily made packs lay about, the frying pan beside the stove and the kettle on its side by the door. November moved round examining everything in his deft, light way. Lastly, he picked up the kettle and peered inside.

"What's in it?" said I.

"Nothing," returned November. "Well, Thompson told you he hadn't filled it," I reminded him.

He gave me a queer little smile. "Just so," said he and strolled for fifty yards or so up the tote road.

"I've been along looking at the footmarks of them six mossbacks," he volunteered. "Now we'll look around here."

The inspection of the tracks was naturally a somewhat lengthy business. November had studied the trail of the six men to some purpose, for, though he hardly paused as he ranged the trodden ground, so swift were his eyes that he named each of the men to me as he pointed to their several tracks. As we approached the bank he indicated a distinct set of footsteps, which we followed to the hut and back again to the water.

"He's the chap that did it," said November. "That's pretty plain."

"He is a heavier man than I am, and he walks rather on his heels."

November nodded, and began to follow the trail, which went down into the stream. He stood at the water's edge examining some stones which had been recently displaced, then waded down into it.

"Where was his boat?" I asked.

But November had by now reached a large flat stone some feet out in the water, and this he was looking round and over with great care. Then he beckoned to me. The stone was a large, flat one, as I have said, and he showed me some scratches upon its farther surface. The scratches were deep and irregular. I stared at them, but to me they conveyed nothing.

"They don't look like the mark of a boat," I ventured.

"They aren't. But that chap made them all right," he said.

"But how or why?"

November laughed. "I won't answer that yet, but I'll tell you this, the robbery was done between 2 and 3 o'clock last night."

"What makes you say that?"

November pointed to a grove of birch on the nearer bank.

"Those trees," he answered; then, on seeing my look of bewilderment, he added, "and he wasn't a 200 pound man an' heavier than you, but a little thin chap, and he hadn't a boat."

"Then how did he get away—by wading?"

"Maybe he waded."

"If he did he must have left the stream somewhere," I exclaimed.

"Sure."

"Then you'll be able to find his tracks where he landed."

"No need to."

"Why?"

"Because I'm sure of my man." "Is it the same who held up Dan Michaels?"

"Yes."

With that I had to be satisfied. It was late at night when we approached Camp C. We jumped ashore and went straight to the office, where

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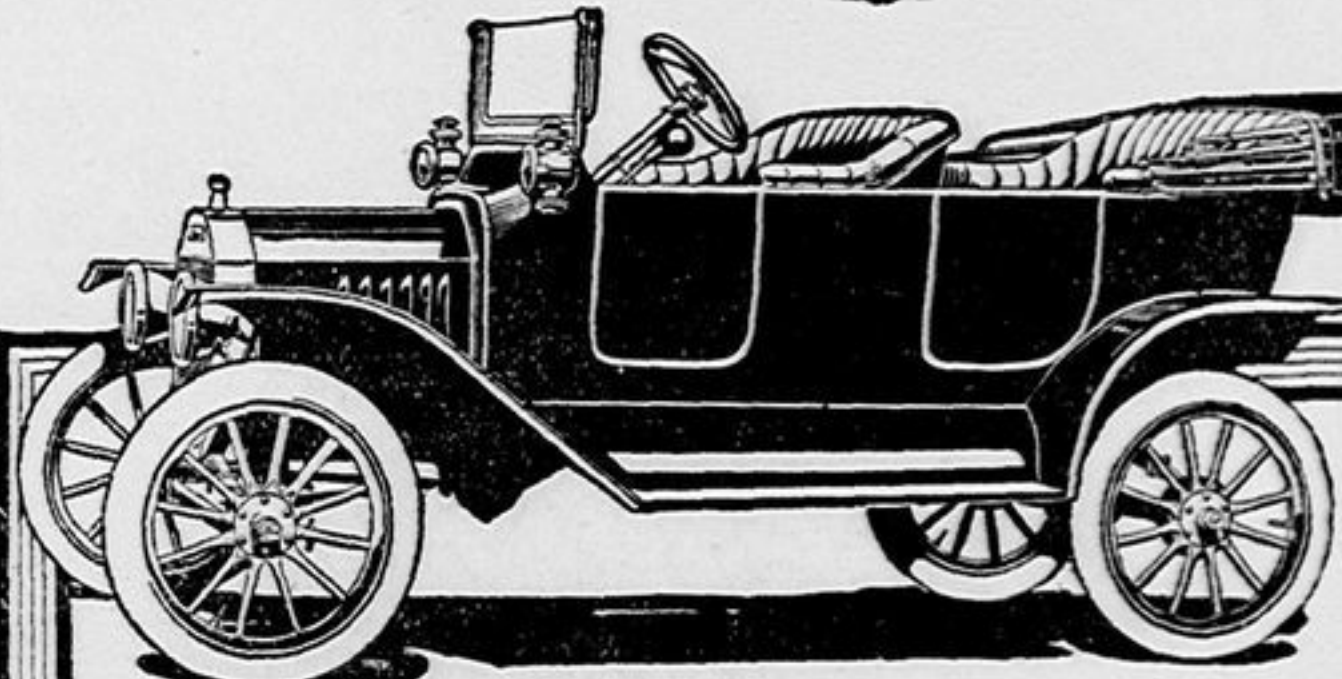
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