

it was only where, at long intervals, paths from the north or south broke into the main logging-road that November had reason to pause. But one by one we passed these by, until at last the tracks we were following shot away among the trees, and after a mile of deadfalls and moss debouched into a little clearing beside a back water, grown round with high yellow grass and covered over the larger part of its surface with lily-pads.

The trail, after leading along the margin of this water, struck back to a higher reach of the same river that ran by Big Tree Portage, and then we were at once on the site of a deserted camp.

The very first thing my eye lit upon caused me to cry out in excitement; for side by side were two beds of balsam branches, that had evidently been placed under the shelter of the same tent cover. November, then, was right; Lyon had camped with his murderer on the night before he died.

I called out to him. His quiet patience and his attitude of semi-detachment from events fell away from him like a cloak, and with almost uncanny swiftness he was making his examination of the camp.

I entirely believe that he was unconscious of my presence, so concentrated was he on his work, as I followed him from spot to spot with an interest and excitement that no form of big game shooting has ever given me. For now man was the quarry, and, as it seemed, a man more dangerous than any beast. But I was destined to disappointment, for as far as I could see he discovered neither any clue nor anything unusual.

To begin with, he took up and sifted through the layers of balsam boughs which had composed the beds; but apparently made no find. From there he turned quickly, to kneel down by the ashy remains of the fire, and to examine the charred logs one by one. After that, he followed a well-marked trail that led away from the lake to a small marsh, in the farther part of which masts of dead timber were standing in great profusion. Nearer at hand, a number of stumps showed where the campers had chopped the wood for their fire.

After looking closely at these stumps, November went swiftly back to the camp and spent the next ten minutes in following the tracks which led in all directions. Then, once more, he came back to the fire and methodically lifted off one charred stick after another. At the time, I could not imagine why he did this; but, when I understood it, the reason was as simple and obvious as was that for his every action, when once it was explained.

Before men leave a camp, they seem instinctively to throw such trifles as they do not require or wish to carry on with them, into the fire. The latter is generally expiring, for a first axiom of the true camper in the woods is never to leave his fire alight behind him, for fear of a chance ember starting a forest conflagration.

In this case, November had removed nearly every bit of wood before I heard him utter a smothered exclamation, as he held up a piece of stick.

I took it into my own hands and looked it over. It was charred, but I saw that one end had been split and the other end sharpened.

"What in the world is it?" I asked puzzled.

November smiled. "Just evidence," he said.

November spent another few minutes in looking everything over a second time; then, he took up his axe and split a couple of logs and lit the fire. Over it he hung his inevitable kettle, and boiled the leaves of our morning brew, with a liberal handful freshly added. November Joe's capacity for drinking strong tea was as remarkable, in its way, as his power of reading the trails of the woods.

"Well," I said, as he touched the end of a burning ember to his pipe, "has this camp helped you?"

"Some," said November. "And you?"

He put the question quite seriously, though, I suspect, not without some inward irony.

"I can see that two men slept here under one tent cover, that they cut the wood for their fire in that marsh we visited and that they were here for a day, perhaps two."

"One was here for three days, the other one night," corrected November.

"How can you tell that?"

November pointed to the ground at the far side of the fire.

"To begin with, Number One had his camp pitched over there," said he; then, seeing my look of perplexity, he added pityingly: "We've a westerly wind these last two days; but before that the wind was east, and he camped a night with his back to it. And in the new camp, one bed o' boughs is fresher than the other."

The thing seemed so absurdly obvious that I was nettled.

"I suppose there are other indications I have n't noticed," I said.

"There might be some you have n't mentioned," he answered warily. "I observed one or two more."

"What are they?"

"That the man who killed Lyon is thick-set and very strong; that he has been a good while in the woods, without having gone to a settlement; that he owns a blunt hatchet such as we woods' chaps call 'tomahawk, number three'; that he killed a moose last week; that he can read; that he spent the night before the murder in great trouble of mind; and that likely he was a religious kind of a chap."

As November reeled off these details in his quiet, low-keyed voice, I stared at him in amazement.

"But how can you have found out all this?" I said at last. "It's wonderful!"

"I'll tell you, if you still want to hear, when I've got my man—if ever I do get him. One thing is sure, he is a chap who knew Lyon well. The rest of the job lies in the settlement of St. Amiel, where Lyon lived."

We walked back to Big Tree Portage, and from there we ran down in the canoe to St. Amiel, arriving the following evening. About half a mile short of the settlement, November landed and set up our camp. Afterward, we went on. I had never before visited the place, and I found it to be a little colony of scattered houses, straggling beside the river. It possessed two stores and one of the smallest churches I have ever seen.

"You can help me here, if you will," said November, as we paused before the larger of the stores.

"Of course I will. How?"

"By letting 'em think you've engaged me as your guide, and we've come in to St. Amiel to buy some grub and gear we've run short of."

"All right." With this arrangement, we entered the store; and here I will withhold my pen, nor make any attempt to describe by what roundabout courses of talk November learned all the news of desolate little St. Amiel and of the surrounding countryside. Had I not known exactly what he wanted, I should never have dreamed that he was seeking information. He played the desultory, uninterested listener to perfection. The Provincial police had evidently found means to close the mouth of the lumber-jack, for the time at least, as no hint of Lyon's death had yet drifted back to his native place.

Little by little, it came out that only five men were absent from the settlement. Two of these, Fitz and Baxter Gunn, were brothers, who had gone on an extended trapping expedition. The other absentees were Highamson, Lyon's father-in-law; Thomas Miller, a professional guide and hunter; and lastly Henry Lyon himself, who had gone up to visit his traps, starting on the previous Friday. The other men had all been away three weeks or more and all had started in canoes, except Lyon, who having sold his, went on foot.

Next, by imperceptible degrees, the talk slid round to the subject of Lyon's wife. They had been married four years and had no child. She had been the belle of St. Amiel, and there had been no small competition for her hand. Of the absent men, both Miller and Fitz Gunn had been her suitors, and the former and Lyon had never been on good terms since the marriage. The younger Gunn was a wild fellow, and only his brother's influence kept him straight.

So much we heard, before November wrapped

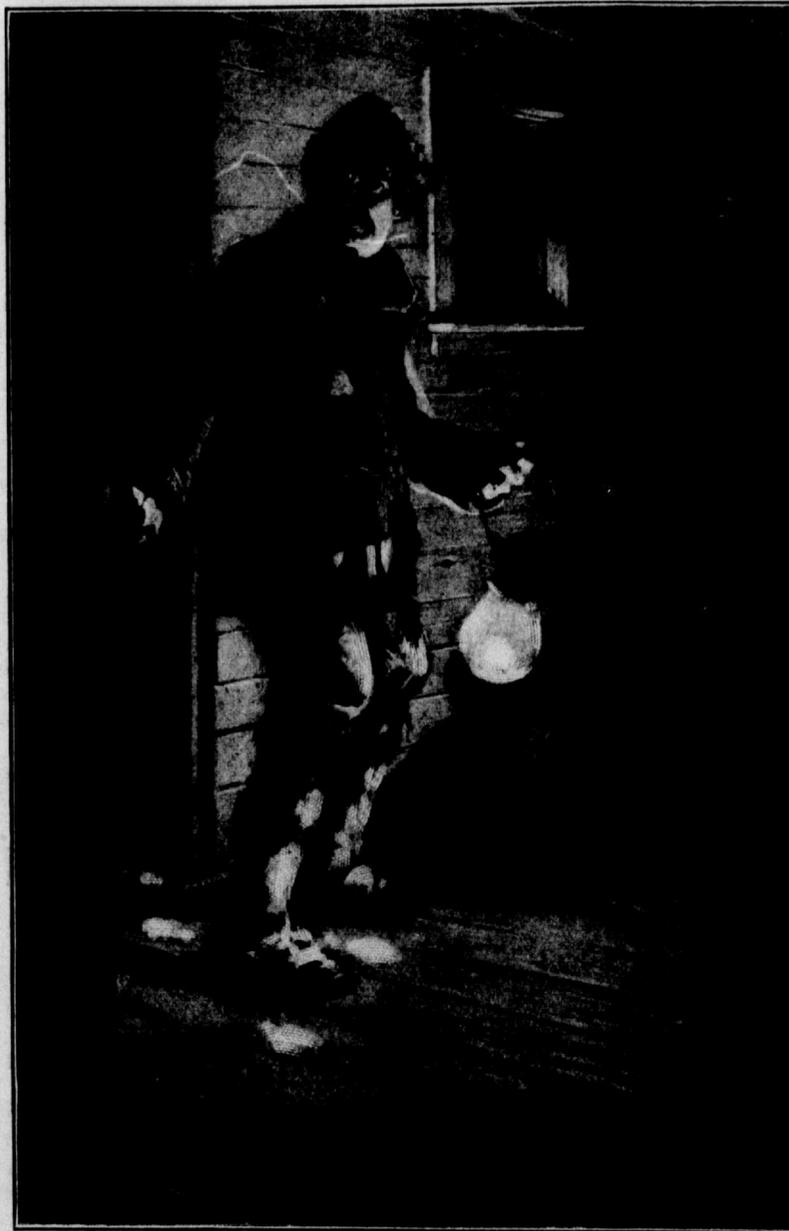
up our purchases and we bade a casual good-bye.

No sooner were we away than I put my eager question: "What do you think of it?"

"Nothing—yet."

"Do you know any of these men?"

"All of them," answered November Joe quietly.



The first intimation he had of our presence was November's "Hello!"

"How about the fellow who is on bad terms with . . ."

November seized my arm. A man was approaching through the dusk. As he passed, my companion hailed him.

"Hullo, Baxter! Did n't know you'd come back. Where've you been?"

"Right up on the headwaters."

"Fitz come down with you?"

"No, stayed on the line of traps. Did you want him, November?"

"Yes, but it can wait. See any moose?"

"Nary one . . . nothing but red deer."

"Good-night."

"So long."

"That settles it," said November. "If he speaks the truth, as I believe he does, it was n't either of the Gunns shot Lyon."

"Why not?"

"Did n't you hear him say they had n't seen any moose? And I told you that the man who shot Lyon had killed a moose quite recent. That leaves just Miller and Highamson—and it were n't Miller."

"You're sure of that?"

"Stark certain. One reason is that Miller's above six foot, and the man as camped with Lyon was n't as tall by six inches. Another reason: You heard the storekeeper say how Miller and Lyon was n't on speaking terms? Yet the man who shot Lyon camped with him, slept beside him . . . must a talked to him. That were n't Miller."

It appalled me to hear his clear and ruthless reasoning ring true.

"Highamson lives alone, away up above Lyon's," continued November; "he'll make back home soon."

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