

What had Miss Novillo said in that other letter of hers? Why was I so confoundedly mysterious? Had she mentioned him? and so forth. I could only return feeble and evasive replies, which, of course, did not satisfy him. He tried wheedling me and he tried bullying me, but he might just as well have talked to a stone wall. The secret, I resolved, should only be dragged from me with my life, and at last he gave it up, and subsided into a state of silent and subdued ferocity which made me exceedingly uncomfortable.

But when we reached our camp there was good news for us, and Percival came out of the sulks on hearing that the tracks of a whole bear family—father, mother, and two cubs—had been seen on the freshly fallen snow not a couple of miles away. The guides had already arranged our plan of action for the morrow, and pretended, as those fellows always do, to be so intimately acquainted with the habits of bears in general as to know to a nicety what their programme would be too. Paterfamilias, we were informed, would start with break of day for the higher pastures above the village of El-Plan, whither some Spanish shepherds were known to have taken their flocks. The mother and cubs would probably remain either among or above the pine woods which clothed the southern side of our valley. Now, if the south wind held, what we had to do was simple enough. We had only to mount the opposite slopes towards the spot where the tracks had been seen, and there was little danger of our mounting so high as to place ourselves between the wind and our game. It was further considered advisable that we should separate into two parties, one of which should have for its object the destruction of Mr. Bruin, while the other should account for Mrs. B. and the children. The arrangement was not agreed to without some discussion and alternative suggestions—for Percival always hated to do as he was told, but it was the one finally adopted, and when the morning broke soft and cloudy, with a light breeze blowing in our faces, Percival and his party set off to the westward in the direction of El-Plan, I and mine heading for the pine woods immediately facing us.

"That ought to give you the best chance, Oliver," said my friend, generously, as we parted.

I don't know when I have passed a more thoroughly comfortless hour than that we spent in clambering up through those dense woods. The mountain side was very precipitous, we had to advance as gingerly as possible, so as to avoid making a noise, and whenever I slipped or trod on a dry twig Jean-Pierre, the chasseur who was in command of me, turned round, making hideous faces, and cursed me under his breath. Furthermore, I couldn't help thinking that, if the bear chose to appear suddenly at this stage of the proceedings, it would be an awkward business for all of us.

We encountered no bear in the woods, but, when, at length, we rose above the region of trees and emerged upon a stretch of coarse grass, we were rewarded for our climb by discovering traces which there was no mistaking upon a patch of the fast-melting snow. Following these up hopefully, we soon found ourselves upon the edge of a tolerably extensive snow field, across which the tracks were so distinct that Jean-Pierre declared that they were not an hour old. He further professed to be able to see that the beast had been moving upwards at a leisurely pace, having no suspicion of being pursued, and prophesied that we should catch him up on some cliffs to which he pointed, and which he calculated that it would take us something like an hour to reach.

I was very glad when we did reach them, for toiling up-hill through soft snow is not my notion of enjoyment, but I was not particularly sanguine as to the chance of Bruin's having had the civility to wait for us, and, once upon the bare rocks, we had no longer any clue to guide us to his whereabouts. Jean-Pierre, nevertheless, continued to be full of confidence. He went on ahead, skirting the face of the precipice, where there was just foothold and no more, and the rest of us followed. After a time he held up his hand to stop us, bent down and examined the rock where a slight sprinkling of snow had lodged, advanced a little way, came back again, and then, pointing to a deep cleft just in front of us, exclaimed, "Il est là!"

I was at once posted at the entrance of this fissure, and warned—in order to steady my nerves, I suppose—that if I missed I was a dead man; after which a stone was thrown in. No result. A second, and a larger one, however, elicited a deep gr-r-r, which put an end to all doubt.

"Attention, m'sieur, s'il vous plaît!" sang out Jean Pierre, and I fired into the chasm.

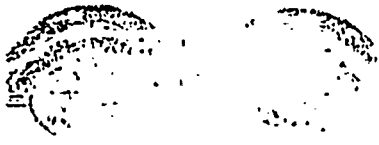
Immediately a large, dark mass hurled itself out through the smoke. I suppose I must have taken aim, though I can't say that I have any recollection of doing so, for the next instant a fine large bear lay stone-dead at my feet.

Well, I dare say we kicked up rather more row over it than we need have done (Percival declared afterwards that he could have heard us jelling ten miles away), but I think perhaps it might count as an extenuating circumstance that this was my first bear. As for the natives, of course they ought to have known better.

So far everything had gone quite according to programme, except that it was the old he-bear, not his partner, that I had killed; but now came the question of whether we were to rest satisfied with what we had accomplished and return to camp, or whether we should push on and try to effect a junction with Percival.

After some debate it was agreed that Jean-Pierre and I should adopt the latter course. I quite admit that this was all wrong, but I was flushed with success, and I thought, supposing that Percival should happen to miss, what a thousand pities it would be that there should not be somebody at hand to back him up.

(To be continued.)



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