

Where The Trail Ended

Written for The Western Home Monthly by H. Mortimer Batten

I.

BELLMAN Ward was in Canyon Reach for stores when he happened across the following small advert in "The Nugget": "Wanted, large grizzlies for exhibition, must be uninjured, highest prices and all expenses paid," and after that the address of the Frisco offices of one of the largest wild animal dealers in the world.

Ward pondered it over, then sent a night lettergram which the bartender at the Smithson House helped him draw up. "Bellman Ward, Deadland Gulch, has two exceptional grizzlies under observation. ("Better say two," observed Ward, "though they ain't only one.") Have I to trap them for you?"

"That ought to hit them," observed the bartender. "Sounds as though you're so dead sure that you've nothing to do but step in and do it, easy as kiss my hand!"

Next day a reply came. It was peremptory and to the point. "Stay in town. We will meet you at post office tomorrow mid-day."

"Gee wizz!" muttered Ward. "They're bringing along the whole board of directors." And little he dreamt that his whole future career was in the mould.

At the time appointed Ward was sitting on a soap box in the central store and post office, idly chatting with the Indians, when there entered at the door the tallest, lankiest man he had ever seen. He was dressed in city clothing which somehow seemed out of place on his giant, bony frame, and his quick grey eyes seemed to take in everything at a glance.

"You Mr. Ward?" he enquired in a voice of thunder.

"Yep!" and Ward jumped out. He was a man of medium stature, thin, wiry, quick as a panther, but against the giant animal dealer he looked the merest pigmy.

"Come outside," bellowed the latter, and with Ward trotting behind he crossed the road, seated himself on a ramplike almost the height of the mountaineer's shoulders, and began — "My name's Soo Pettit. Now about these grizzlies — are they both exceptional specimens?"

"No, only one, the male probably."

"Hur, sure the female belong to him? An exceptional grizzly usually lives alone."

"Maybe she do, maybe she don't. There's a whole outfit of them along my range. I see the big one most."

"Is he a silvertip?" enquired the dealer.

"Yes."

"Good! What do you guess his weight?"

"He'll tip the beam at well over one thousand."

The big one whistled, and invited Ward to "come off the roof."

"I tell you plump now that he's the biggest grizzly I've ever seen," asserted Ward, coloring. "I ain't asking you to accept my statements, but since you asked me —"

"All right," the big man cut him short. "How long have you seen this grizzly about?"

"Quite a while. I reckon I can trap him without breaking him up any."

A thoughtful look came into the big man's eyes. "With a grizzly, what you've got to guard against ain't so much breaking his bones as breaking his spirit. If you treat him roughly he may just die of a broken heart." He rose abruptly. "What do you want for that grizzly delivered in good shape?"

"Two hundred dollars."

"You shall have it. Want anything on account?"

"Nope."

"I'll send a man along to lend you a hand."

"Don't want that neither," retorted Ward. "I reckon I know all about grizzlies there is to know."

"How are you going to portage him out?"

"I got to get him first, then the Indians will help me."

The big man was thoughtful. "Blame unwise," he muttered under his breath. "When do you pull out?"

"To-night," and there and then final arrangements were made and the agreement signed.

At sundown Bellman Ward, mounted on a wiry cayuse and with the pack horse, loaded high with traps and gear, following behind, rode out into the grey loneliness of the foothills for his distant hunting grounds. He arrived at noon next day, and set his cabin in order for a busy spell.

Ward was one of those trappers who don't believe in baits, and in the process of circumventing a wild animal his first act was to make himself familiar with all its runways. Already he knew pretty well the chosen routes of the bear he was now out to catch, for he had watched the brute as a disinterested spectator for months past. More than once they had met in awkward places, and between them there stood a tacit understanding that on such occasions the one who could most easily do so should turn back. Bellman had possessed no quarrel with the big grizzly, and hitherto they had lived on perfectly good terms. The great animal had more than once come down and fed at the mountaineer's garbage heap, when Ward could, had he chosen, have shot it with a revolver from his cabin window. Thus, since he had entirely won the confidence of the brute, it is not to be wondered at that already he regarded that two hundred dollars plus expenses as a cinch.

During the first few days Ward spent his time loafing about the range with a prospecting pick, while from his saddle there hung two No. 8 Whitehouse grizzly traps. He was not long in picking up the grizzly. From a wind-swept ridge he commanded a view of the valley below, of the long and narrow lake, winding in and out among its countless fairy islands between the dark uplands of spruce. At the lake margin something was moving — something clearly visible in the dead clear atmosphere in spite of the immense distance. It must have been nine miles away, yet it looked like an omnibus.

"That's him," muttered Bellman aloud. "Coming along the lake margin, looking for fish, then to-night he'll climb out by Crooked Leg Fissure, on his usual route, cross the sheep range, strike Cranberry Creek, and as like as not pay my rubbish heap a visit on his way out. I'll set for him in the fissure."

At its north end, in which direction the bear was heading, the lake ceased in a vast bowl of the mountains, the naked cliffs rising skywards on every side. There was but one way out, the Crooked Leg Fissure, the rugged course of a torrent forming, as it were, a staircase through the cliffs, and towards the head of this cutting Ward now made his way. Reaching the brink he was compelled to descend on foot, for it was terribly rough going, and about one hundred feet down two giant boulders barred the way save for a sandy patch between them. Under the sand Bellman set his traps, confident that the bear could not pass through without encountering one or the other of them, then he spilt water over the sets, brushed out the last of his tracks, and made his way by devious routes back to his cayuse.

At dawn next day Ward went back to look at his sets. He was unarmed, save for a heavy automatic pistol. With him he took four stout posts, a trip hammer, four stout rawhide lariats, and an immense hemp net. These things he left with his pack horse and saddle horse at the crest of the fissure, then silently, cautiously, began to descend to a point of observation.

No, by gad, the bear was not there, but the sandy space was torn up for a dozen yards all round the traps. Ward was about to creep from his hiding when

a sound like a human sigh caught his ears. He turned to see an immense grey shape hurtling down the mountain side towards him—an avalanche of flesh and bone, travelling at the speed of a galloping cayuse. He must have passed within a few feet of the hiding grizzly. It had waited till he was well below, his back towards it, then it had charged.

Ward's hand slipped to the big automatic at his belt, but he was loath to use it. He marvelled as he stood, in that moment of deadly peril, that the bear, in spite of its weight and speed, was moving over the loose rocks without so much as disturbing a pebble. For perhaps two seconds he stood, then, leaping from ledge to ledge, he gained the chaos of sage bush lining the south bank of the fissure, and bending low he dodged from bush to bush, back-tracking criss-crossing, tying a hundred knots in his trail. The bear gained the shelf where he had stood, and lost ten priceless seconds sniffing the breeze. Ward, as he looked, saw that it stood with one paw raised, then he uttered a breathless curse as he saw the immense brute come on, straight towards him.

The hours that followed were not very enjoyable for Ward, though he soon succeeded in increasing his start. The bear had lost him, and systematically set to work beating the scrub—falling on every thicket and watching each time for the man to bolt from the other side. He kept it up for nearly an hour, and Ward, thirsty, sweating, covered with sand, crept from point to point like a hunted jackal, guided as to direction by the crashing of the bush.

Finally the bear mounted the fissure and was lost to view, while Ward, his nerves somewhat shaken, went to his traps. One of them, he found, had been shattered to fragments against the rocks, the other remained un sprung, then climbing to the crown of the ridge the mountaineer found that both his ponies had been stampeded. There remained ahead of him a twelve-mile tramp over the roughest country in all the range, and added to this was the knowledge that between him and the bear there now existed a deadly feud which made the task ahead of him endlessly more difficult and hazardous. But Ward was one of those men who, having set himself a task, would pursue it long after all sane judgment and common sense had commanded its dismissal.

II.

On his way home Ward saw the smoke of a camp fire rising skywards from a sheltered gully, so went that way in the hope of borrowing a horse. As he approached he saw a huge man seated by the fire, and something in his poise struck Ward as familiar. Drawing nearer still he recognized the camper—it was no other than Soo Pettit, the man with whom he had come to terms.

Pettit had relinquished his city gear, and now wore the leather kit of the cowboy mountaineer. As Ward drew near he uttered a bellowing laugh, then rose with a friendly hand extended. "Have some grub," was all he said.

Bellman scowled. "This is my range," he answered gruffly, placing his hands behind him.

"The range is free," came the quiet response, and Pettit went on with his cooking. He had seen that wild look in Bellman's eyes, and knew what it meant. Bellman had lived too much alone. The solitude was getting him down, and the most commonplace event might send him off at a tangent.

"That's my grizzly, anyway!" roared the trapper, now thoroughly irritated. "We've come to terms on a proper footing, and you ain't no right butting in."

The other smiled. "Talk sense, Ward." He recommended. "Game belongs to no man till its taken." He dropped another egg into the pan. "Go ahead and get the grizzly," he advised. "I ain't standing in your way. You'll get your money,

and if you want help I'm right here to lend a hand."

"You're here to get the grizzly yourself!" bellowed Ward.

The other shrugged his huge shoulders. "Even so," he muttered quietly. "The best man gets the bear. The range is big enough for both of us."

Ward was silent for a moment. "I see your ding dong game!" he muttered. "You advertise to find the locality of what you want, then, having gulled the local trapper, you step right in and do the job yourself, and he gets nary a cent! Pretty low down I call it, and I expect there's a whole outfit of you."

The other shook his head. "I'm alone," said he. "If you hadn't been so blamed selfish we might be hunting together."

Ward stepped back, and when next Pettit looked up he could see down the barrel of the trapper's .450. "Get out!" roared Bellman. "Get out! you low down son of a gun, and if I catch you monkeying around again I'll pump you as full of lead as a porcupine is of quills!"

Pettit shrugged his shoulders. "Pump away," he advised. "Blow a hole in me the size of a walnut, for that's what it means to shoot a man. As for the grizzly you ain't dealing with me, but with the firm. I'm merely obeying orders, and I got to see the job through. I'm just a hunter like yourself."

Ward's big automatic clattered back into its holster. He stood with his hands behind him, a look of admiration on his parchment face. "Bully!" he murmured. "The range is free, and the best man gets the grizzly. Now give me some grub, then lend me your pack horse to ride home on."

They ate together. Neither spoke. At the end of the meal Ward rose. "Sonny," he said, "you may as well go home and save your time. The range of that grizzly is over fifty miles, and you don't stand a lame duck's chance. You'll only get in the way and spoil sport for me."

"I shan't spoil sport," vouched the other. "I've hunted grizzly and cougar twenty years—caught more of 'em alive than most men have ever seen."

Ward mounted. "That may be so, but you don't know this range and you don't know this grizzly. I had him trapped last night, but he broke loose, and now he's as vicious as sin. If you happen to run up against him accidental, it might be awkward, you savvy?"

The other smiled, and Ward rode away. He came back at sundown on one of his own horses, leading the one he had borrowed, and as he rode back in the gathering gloom it was to be noticed that, for the first time, he avoided the cliff shelves which afforded the swiftest and easiest way of passage.

"Poor beggar," thought Pettit, who knew the wild and the men who dwell therein. "Another six months and he'll be as crazy as a loon."

That night a mammoth grizzly peered down from the heights of Sheep Mountain at a tiny camp fire flickering among the trees. There he stood, swinging heavily from side to side, his great head lowered, one bruised paw upheld, and as he stared his little eyes seemed to narrow, and took on the red light of the fire. It was Pettit's camp he saw, and Pettit sat alone by the fire, poring over an ink drawn map, his rifle at his side. He was a brave man—brave in that he feared nothing on earth, if such is bravery.

Slowly, cautiously, the grizzly began to wend its way down the mountain side, making no more noise than a cat, and looking more like a buffalo than a bear. Fifty yards from the camp it paused and sat upright. The wind blew from the man to it, and now the savage gleam of hatred shone like fire in the small, unblinking eyes. To attack the man would be folly, but directly behind him his two horses were tethered to a windfall, moving restlessly as the flies

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