

Above the Timber Belt

Written for The Western Home Monthly by H. Mortimer Batten

WHEN Porson Andrews, the millionaire, decided to hunt that fall in the Hooded Crow Mountain locality, he obtained the very best guide the district could provide in the personality of Nat Hilderwood. Hilderwood was a mountaineer of uncommon gifts, possessing a veritable sixth sense for locating game; but millionaires were his pet aversion. "What I have invented and what I have organized is the crux of their conversation," he would assert. "And I never ran up against one yet who could hunt for toffee."

If Nat held this opinion previously, he certainly had some grounds for holding it after a week with Porson Andrews, for in spite of the man's boasting, Nat decided that he knew "hang all about game." To-day it was frizzingly hot, and though fall was far spent the blackflies were busy; thus Nat found the millionaire's company more irksome than usual. "I tell you," Andrews was saying, "you Rocky Mountain guides don't know what hunting is. You want to go to the Zambesi where I killed my white rhino, two lions and six elephants in a week."

"Thought you were used to the tropics," drawled the guide. "That explains why you can't lay a camp fire for nuts."

"But I can shoot!" responded Porson defensively. "My record bag was twenty-four bull elephants in a week. My system was to walk right in, irrespective of danger, and drop the two best bulls with a couple of shots."

Nat gave a low whistle. Obviously the man was lying. "There ain't no legal limit in the African game reserves, then!" he observed with clearly assumed surprise. "It says so in the guide books, but expect they're wrong. Anyway, if you want big game, sir, you shall have it. There are grizzly on this range, and I can take you right to them if you like?"

"Grizzly—just my mark!" exclaimed Andrews. "I'm tired of deer and caribou, so get a move on."

Nat got a move on. He gave Andrews a climb the city man was not to forget. Straight up the almost perpendicular mountain side, packing a huge load, he led the way, setting a pace which the best of Indians would have been hard put to hold. When dusk fell they were high above the timber belt, and Nat was a good mile ahead. By the time the millionaire, panting and fuming, gained him, camp was made, and a meal prepared.

"Now sir, to-morrow you shall see grizzly," said Nat. "Large silvertip, probably. Cross Pearson, the prospector, was near knocked out by one of them a month ago. I helped carry him down—awful mess! He's still in hospital."

It was very wind-swept, silent, and desolate up there on the heights. Here and there lay the eternal glaciers, radiant and ghostly between the blackness, seeming to radiate a pale phosphorescence in the starlight. To one unaccustomed to it the silence was awful, and the millionaire piled more brush on the fire. The guide smiled comprehendingly.

"I suppose grizzly are not dangerous unless you molest them?" enquired Andrews casually.

Nat proceeded to lay it on with a tar brush. "In my opinion, grizzly is dangerous whenever he is hungry," he stated. "One of them charged straight through the survey party's camp up here, laming a half-breed and a dog, and stampeding the ponies. You want to make sure of your first shot, and aim at paralyzing his spine—then he can't charge. But of course you're used to dangerous game."

They turned in after their pipes, and an hour later the guide was amused to see his companion get up and pile armfuls of scrub on the fire—more particularly so because, in spite of the altitude, the night was mild.

At dawn, having cached their gear, they were under way, progressing slowly and cautiously along the head of a mighty glacier which terminated a hundred yards below in a sheer drop of almost two miles sheer into the valley. Here the millionaire insisted on being roped to the guide, though Nat protested that he failed to see the object of company when falling giddily through space.

"Ice climbing ain't my department," argued Andrews. "If I'm tied up to you, I know you won't play any pranks."

So the rope was secured, and with ice pick and rifles the two men carefully progressed, Nat of course, leading the way, his keen eyes alert for any sign of game.

Suddenly the guide stopped, crouched, and motioned to his companion. He had neither seen nor heard the betraying sign, but his nostrils had detected a strong whiff of bear.

"Now this," thought Nat, "is an uncommonly embarrassing situation. If this fool at the other end of the rope spots grizzly, there ain't any telling just what he'd do. As like as not he'd forget the rope, and yank me over into space."

Scarcely had these thoughts flashed through his mind when a wild yell sounded behind him, and, turning like a flash, the sight that met his gaze for an instant paralysed him.



This is a striking and recent photograph of General Ferdinand Foch, on the left, who has been chosen Generalissimo of the Allied Armies, and General Sir Douglas Haig, Commander of the British Forces on the Western front. The division under Foch's command played a vital part in the stopping of the Germans at the Battle of the Marne. He has great ability as a tactician and a leader of men, and it has been hinted for some time that he might be appointed to his present great command.

There was Porson Andrews, stark terror staring from his eyes, clearly on the point of blind panic, while crouching flat on a shelf above his head, snarling into his very face, was the largest grizzly Nat had ever seen.

For Nat to have fired would have been folly, for the strike of a grizzly is quick as the strike of a rattlesnake. Andrews, however, was taking no chances. With that one yell he turned back the way they had come, his rifle ricocheting downwards into space.

Nat braced himself for the jerk he could not circumvent. The millionaire leapt, the rope pulling him up midway in the leap. Directly between them crouched the grizzly.

What happened next was horrifying. The millionaire fell backwards, and began to shoot headlong down, down, while Nat, having no time to recover his foothold, was totally unprepared for the second jerk

as the rope tightened again. Next instant both of them were sliding with increasing speed down the waterwashed face of the glacier.

It was a horrible moment. In another few seconds they would shoot giddily over the edge, to fall into the far-off valley below.

But the guide was prepared. Again and again he struck with his pick, and at length it held. Slowly but surely, amidst a cloud of ice particles, leaving a jagged furrow behind them, their progress was arrested.

Nat peered down, to be met by an expression of unspeakable horror in his companion's face. Then he glanced up to see how far they had fallen, and was just in time to observe a very peaceful looking old grizzly get up and amble over the brow.

"Now you got us into an almighty mess," cried the guide angrily. "Get a grip with your hunting knife, and ease the rope."

this time he was sustaining his own weight and half that of his companion by his grip upon the ice pick, the glacier falling away under them in a house-side gradient. "I know your sort," Nat continued, "and it would kind of be like a change of air to get the truth out of you. In the first place," he sneered, "I'd like to know whether you did any hunting in Africa, or whether you bought those trophies of yours from the natives?"

"What's your game?" growled Porson. "Want to blackmail me, now you've got me, and so get hold of some of my money?"

Nat uttered a ringing laugh. "Hang your filthy money," he retorted. "All I want is the truth." Then suddenly he became grave. "Listen to me," he ordered. "I got a pal way down in Colorado. Kind of a lunger he is—sick to get out into the hills, and the doctors reckon it's his only chance. But men on small ranches who have three or four kiddies to think about—"

"Curse your pal!" yelled the millionaire. "Get me out of this, and there's a thousand dollars for you."

"Shut up, or I'll let you down!" growled the guide viciously, striking his fingers across the rope till it vibrated. "You got us into this, but now I'm bossing the show. My pal lives in Provence Valley, and three years ago he struck oil on his claim. Well, the millionaire who owns the railway in those parts makes him an offer for it—about a fiftieth of what it's worth—and when my pal refuses he's told—then sell to someone else and build your own railway."

"Say," Nat added, "don't you reckon that millionaire's every which kind of a skunk?"

"Oh, a rogue—of course," panted Andrews, "but for goodness sake get us out of this. I can't stick it much longer."

"That's my opinion of him," drawled the guide coolly. "I think if I had him at the end of this rope, I'd cut him loose and let him drop."

The millionaire groaned aloud. The sweat was streaming down his forehead into his eyes. "For God's sake don't do that!" he muttered hoarsely. "I'll give you two thousand—three thousand—"

Again Nat's clear laugh filled the awful stillness, and again he turned suddenly grave. "Mr. Andrews," he said quietly, "hell's full of men like you. If I let you drop it would leave the world a better place. You're a millionaire, and you look down on my kind earning three dollars a day, but anyhow I live straight and clean, and I don't lie about the game I've killed. Nor do I try to buy my fellow men with blood money. I hate your sort more than I can say, and I reckon you know who I've been talking about. You're the man who refused to give my pal an honest price for his oil field, and left him to struggle on with his wife and kiddies before you'd part with a few hundred out of your millions."

Andrews was trembling. "I'll pay your pal what he's asking—if that's what you want," he blurted out. "Now get us out of this."

Nat's iron muscles as yet hardly felt the strain. He laughed a shade whimsically. "It won't do," he answered, "and I may as well tell you right here and now that I couldn't save you if I wanted to. The ice is clean swept and hard as diamond, and you and I stick here till we can't stick no longer. Then we go out together."

The man of millions buried his face in the ice with a shuddering cry, and an expression of sympathy came into Nat's keen eyes as he looked down at him.

"Heavens, do you mean it, Nat?" cried Andrews, trembling from head to foot; and the guide nodded gravely.

There was a long and terrible silence. Low over their heads an eagle circled and soared. Presently the millionaire began to blubber aloud like a frightened child, and the comparison between them was marvellous—the one with power and influence terrified beyond words, blubbering and moaning, and the unknown, frugal man of the ranges cool and thoughtful, looking down on him with a shade of contempt on his bronzed features, prepared to meet the end with quiet resignation.

At length Andrews spoke. "Nat," he said, "I calculate I've been no end of a quitter, but this is the finish. We stand face to face now, simple men; as God made us, and I'm proud to go out with such company as you. And Nat—I'll tell you this—his voice softened and became well controlled, "I ain't scared