

A Reminiscence of Kootenai Brown

(By Joseph C. Cosley)

Jack Street had ridden a sea-bitten colt to my shack on Bolly River, to see if I would go and break some young horses for him and Kootenai Brown, his partner on a ranch in the Waterton Lake district. He would have returned home in the late hours of that same day if I had not persuaded him to remain over night.

"That evening we sat before the fireplace and exchanged remarks about hunting big game in the Rockies. Then his conversation drifted upon an incident which had occurred to him and John George (Kootenai) Brown at some point west of the Mountains. As he refilled his pipe, he said:

"Do you know Kootenai, the old scout and frontiersman of bygone days?" I answered that I did, but not enough to know him as I would a closer friend.

"Well, he is a queer fish, a good sport, a great hunter; but at times he makes a great blunder of things when excited. No, I should say he does even when not excited. He is a funny man, hard-headed as I ever knew, to have his own way and disregard everything that is possible to be right that you say to him. Now, for instance, he made the foulest blunder in my presence that almost cost him his life." Jack turned his face away to hide the severity which he assumed in the very thought of it.

"That's nothing; we all make blunders, more or less, in the course of our lives, even though we are perfectly normal in nature and having clear conception to see straight," I remarked. He looked at me and smiled.

"That is so," he said. "We can see other fellows' faults, but we cannot see ours. But there are fellows who are habitually blunderers. Yet Kootenai is not a man of that sort; still, when he makes one it is very noticeable."

"What sort of blunders does he usually make that you should perceive with disgust?" I asked by way of starting him on with an explanation. He cleared his throat, shrugged his shoulders and crossed his legs as he adjusted himself to begin with his story of old Kootenai Brown.

"No, he is not a slow-witted fellow; he's a smart man, Kootenai is; but I guess he is unable to think quick when something springs up suddenly that requires lightning, instant thought for quick action. Now, here is one mistake I want to tell you that was sure a blunder."

"He turned and faced me; his eyes twinkled lightly. "It was in the spring of the year while yet the snow lay in patches in the timbers and a few large drifts still in the flats that Kootenai and me had outfitted and left for Kootenai Plains on a prospecting tour in search of placer gold that he had found some 20 years ago. We came to the mouth of a canyon through which a small stream of water trickled down northward with an extension of gravel flat on both sides. Things looked good to us as we pitched our tent at the base of a high bank to the left of the creek. Kootenai said that there was gold and it could easily be taken out of these gravel beds. We had seen plenty of signs of large game—yes, and some grizzly tracks in the sand just a few feet from our tent."

"The next morning we moved our things to a shack on the brink of the bank and with our pick, shovel, gold pan and rifle we proceeded for the bank which lay not more than a quarter of a mile westward. We prospected all right and found some colors, too; but we grew tired of racing about on those flats. Our ambition for the yellow stuff had worn out for the present, so we proposed to go up the creek and investigate farther up. The country had been burnt after Kootenai had been there, and now a forest of lodgepoles had sprung up with amazing rapidity until some of them had attained the height of 30 feet or more. West of the creek from the bank to the foot of the mountain was a space about 500 yards, untouched by fire, and in this heavy timber moose and elk had yarded up during the past winter."

"We didn't go far. As a matter of fact we found nothing up there. So we returned to the shack pretty well in the afternoon. As we rounded a

clump of heavy spruce trees to the right of the cabin and below the high bank, we saw something move on top of the cabin roof which formed a shelter to the porch. Now, this shack was built so close to the edge of the bank that the roof of the porch projected some few feet beyond, and a railing had been built on the ground floor of the porch to prevent anyone from walking out over the bank, which was 40 feet high and quite steep. Steps were made from the door to the bottom, where a spring of clear water flowed down through the heavy spruce trees.

"We saw at once that the moving object on the roof was a large grizzly and he was removing snow which lay only on that spot. We stood and watched him until he had completed his bed and presently lay down in it. We could just see the hair on his back over the mound of snow he had piled around him. If we hadn't seen him moving up there we would have mistook him for a pile of reddish-brown moss put there. We laid our things down quietly, and I whispered to Kootenai to shoot him from where we stood. It was only 40 yards distant to the cabin.

"No," he said, "I can't see his head, and I fear a clean miss if I give him a random shot. Let's go quietly to the cabin and shoot him from under the porch through the cabin roof."

"But, Kootenai, the covering of the cabin is a scoop roof, I protested. He paid no heed to that as he examined his .30-40, now cocked and ready for instant use. He walked a few steps toward the shack and looked back to see if I was coming.

"Yes, but I can shoot between the cracks and get him sure," he said. That was his final remark, and I knew he was bull-headed.

"We advanced cautiously, climbed the earthen steps and got under the porch as he had designated. Strange as it would seem, neither of us had thought of unlocking the door to seek refuge in the cabin in case the bear was wounded and made for us. I stood near the door and watched Kootenai, who was now pointing here and there with the muzzle of the rifle about where he thought the bear would likely be. Then he took aim and fired.

"Suddenly we heard the shuffling of feet, a loud groan which indicated a growl, and the creaking of the scoops under his heavy weight with a heavy sound as if a sack of sand had suddenly fallen to the ground. Bruin had jumped down, probably wounded. And what next would follow? We hadn't thought quick enough to solve that problem. We were at the mercy of the bear if he came after us."

"Now we're in for it!" I quickly turned to Kootenai, who was trying to unlock his pocket for the key. "I had no time now to look for that key which Kootenai had in his own pocket."

"Climb the cabin roof or run around the corner!" I yelled. "The bear is coming after you!" At the same time I scaled the roof in an instant. I looked down and saw the bear now approaching the porch with his mouth open. Kootenai Brown at this moment took to his feet around the corner in the opposite direction from whence the bear was advancing rapidly.

"Run for your life!" I yelled again to Kootenai, and the bear heard me. He turned and started back to get at me from the side of the shack. Waving my hands to attract the bear, I shouted to Kootenai to turn back, as the bear was coming to meet him. Just then the grizzly leaped on the side of the roofings and clawed hard to get on top. He had succeeded in pulling himself half way up when I spied a stick lying near my feet. I picked it up and slammed three or four strokes on the bear's head and paws which made him let go his hold, and he fell back to the ground just as Kootenai came running under him, and the bear and Kootenai went rolling down the bank to the level ground below.

"I jumped off the roof just as he yelled out to me: 'Shoot him, he is biting me!' I picked up the rifle where he had dropped it, and in an instant I was 10 feet from the bear,

took aim at his head and fired. The huge beast straightened, quivered and died quickly."

"Kootenai Brown got up, smiling; but he was pale. He laid a trembling hand on his shoulder where the bear had bitten him and said: 'Quick work, quick work! You fixed him just before he did his work on me.' And I noticed the wound wasn't serious. But Kootenai wouldn't stay there to look for his yellow metal which he had discovered 40 years ago."

"Why didn't you shoot the bear in the head when he was trying to climb the cabin to get you?" I said. "You had the finest opportunity to blow his brains out at that short distance. I knew he had made a gross blunder which he as yet had not given a thought to."

"Oh, I didn't think of that." He reddened as he spoke, for he knew what I had in mind; but I didn't say it. He turned his face away and said: "I had the confounded thing strapped around me, too."

"Poor men, I feel sorry for them. Jack Street lies buried under an avalanche of snow which has now turned into a glacier in Goat Canyon, at the head of Waterton Lakes, and John George (Kootenai) Brown slumbers on a hill close to the lower lake in Waterton Lakes Park."

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