

SEVEN

TEPEE TALES

The framing device in this story is rather different from the others. The author puts himself in the position of a client from New York, with his wife, who solicits hunting stories from “Jim and Buck,” who are happy to oblige. The Buck character clearly stands in for Tex, with his experience of guiding a party from New York for over twenty years, as Tex did. Tex’s virtuosity as a story-teller comes through here too, in his impersonation of a character significantly more grizzled and less tempted than he was to intersperse erudite Latinisms and Latin puns, Scriptural allusions or other language games into a “mountain man” narrative. The fact that he is able credibly to frame the story this way, himself playing the urbane narrator, suggests a good deal about the ambivalence of his actual position vis-à-vis his colleagues and his customers in the mountains.

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TEPEE TALES

*“Any bird that tries to bluff you he ain’t ever scared is a liar
by the clock”*

By N. Vernon-Wood

IT HAD BECOME an established custom, as soon as the evening dishes were washed and the kindling wood cut and covered for the morning’s fires, for us to sit around in the guide’s tepee, yarning and smoking. After the first few days on the trail, and we had, as Buck Foster, our guide, put it, “gotten the feel of each other,” we looked forward to the evening call, “They’s a fire in the tepee.” Buck, Jim the wrangler, and Joe the cook never wearied of asking questions about New York and the manner of life there, while we, on the other hand, drew them to tell of experiences on the trails and trap lines, and the old ranching days of Alberta.

Jim had just told of an experience of the year previous, when a she-grizzly with two cubs had invaded his camp and gone thoroughly through the grub pile. Not having a rifle in camp, he had tried to drive them away by banging two frying pans together and yelling like an Indian. “She didn’t bluff worth a dime, an’ when she thought I was gettin’ too close to her blame family she made a run at me. What did I do? Man, I lit out of that on the high lope, and left her to it. I bet I bust three or four world’s records for the hundred, two hundred, and half-mile dash. Scared pink, I’ll tell a man.”

“I thought nothing ever frightened you men,” my wife said.

“Don’t you ever believe it, ma’am,” Buck chimed in. “Any bird that tries to bluff you he ain’t ever scared is worth watchin’. He’s a liar by the clock.

“The year I went into this guidin’ business, I got me a jolt that darn near made me quit before I got right started. Only thing that saved me was we were ten days’ travel from the railway, and I had to stick, or walk back and lose my wages.

“I’d got the notion I was a bronco fighter, and was bustin’ them for old Colonel Wyndham on the Anchor S outfit. One mornin’, I climbed onto the middle of a big rangy sorrel, and after he had cat-hopped couple of times he rared up and sort of stood weavin’ on his hind legs. Just as I loosened up in the saddle a mite, he threw himself backwards, an’ me not being quick enough, he fell on top. When I come back to earth, I was on a mattress on the buckboard, bein’ rushed to the Holy Cross Hospital in Calgary, and feelin’ like someone had took out my innards and put ’em back all wrong.

“I got out of the hospital in August, and the doc told me I was through riding for keeps, and that I should go to Banff and sort of loaf. I came up to Banff all right, but the doc didn’t know that a saddle, bed roll and seven dollars real money was all he had left me with to loaf on. It looked like a long slim winter for old man Foster’s boy, but the first guy I run into in Banff was Watty Potts, that used to night hawk for the PX outfit south of the Hat.

“He was in this dude wranglin’ game, and he told me the outfit he worked for could use a good horse jingler. ‘All you got to do,’ he told me, ‘is herd in a few gentle old pack ponies to camp in the mornin’, cut wood, and throw bull to pilgrims from New York, Boston, and such points. Biggest cinch in Alberta.’”

“Times have sure changed,” said Jim. “All a wrangler does now is forty-seven separate and distinct jobs, and cut wood while he’s restin’. If he gets a chance to wash the odd shirt once a month he’s playing in luck.”

“Yeah? Well, I tell you something else; I was a right good little jingler, an’ we didn’t lose any time getting from here to there because old Baldy wasn’t in the herd this mornin’, or take about an hour to catch a colt mornings. I got all of \$35 a month, an’ what we couldn’t carry in our slickers we left behind. What I pay you Tim Eaton cowboys a month was a whole winter’s stake them days, and you carry more dunnage than a horse can jump over. Times have changed all right.” This from Buck, who like all old-timers was convinced that times were not what they were, and that men were like the times.

“Well, as I was sayin,’ when this ex-shuffler interrupted, we pulled out from town with two couples from the East. Our route lay over the Vermilion Pass to the Kootenay, over to the Columbia, and up Toby Creek through the

Selkirks to Lardeau on the East Kootenay Lake. One pair of pilgrims were going to take the steamboat there, and go back by the Crow's Nest Railway, and the others were coming back by trail to Banff. Everyday we was out, I could feel myself getting more like a white man, though I was still sort of spooky.

"As soon as we got into the Selkirks the country got different. The valleys are deep and narrow, horse feed is scarce, and the cedar forest is so darn thick that it's sort of dusk all the time. Goffy sort of layout, and not so pleasant as the Rockies—to my mind anyways.

"I began to have grief with the herd, trying to hit back for the Columbia and good feed. Most every night I had to roll out of the old saddle blankets, an' discourage 'em.

"There was a little old ornery pinto in the bunch that I knew more than most men, and she was always leadin' the rest of the knot-heads. I got so I strung lash ropes from the trees across the trail, and built more fences than would have done some farmers.

"We crossed Earl Grey's pass, and got down Hamil creek to within a day's ride of Lardeau, and the pilgrims decided that next morning the two for the boat would leave us, with Watty and a pack horse, while the rest of us had a field day in camp and washed the other pair of socks. Then at the last minute the other he-pilgrim decides he might as well go along, which left his wife and me to hold down the camp.

"I rustled the herd in right soon in the morning, an' they got away to a good start. Then I cut enough wood to do us the rest of the stay, and after splicing a busted last rope I caught up on a little sleep. That evening, Mrs. Van Deiman and I sat around the campfire until pretty late, talking of this an' that, every so often me dashing into the bush to head off those misguided hay burners.

"I don't know how long after we had turned in, I heard the bell on that pinto misfit coming down the trail, and I was peevish as hell when I rolled out again to head 'em off. I took a two-handed club along, figuring if I got close enough to bend it over her ribs. There wasn't any moon, an' that valley was dark as the insides of a black cat anyway, but about hundred yards from camp I saw something looming up that I thought was the white patches on the worthless hide of the pinto. I lets a whoop out of me and took a swipe at it. Whatever it was I missed it, an' it went 'spit-t-t,' and went up a tree scratchin' an' snarlin' like all get out. Do you expect me to look you between the eyes an' say I wasn't scared? It can't be done. Say, I was

back into the camp an' into the blanket in three jumps, an' I swear I shoved down three four good-sized cedars getting there."

"MRS. VAN WOKE UP and asked what was the matter. I told her I had taken a wallop at a cayuse, and it had gone up a tree. She came out of her tent with a little pearl-handled .38 revolver, and says, "Take this and see what it was."

"'Woman,' I told her, 'that gun ain't one quarter big enough for me right now. What I need is a howitzer.' What was it? Cougar I guess, but I wasn't used to the hills them days, and I knew it was the Koosey Onck itself that night. For a week after, every time Watty got rid of his eatin' tobacco I jumped a foot."

Continued Buck, "At that, being scared on your own account ain't quite so bad as being all spooked up about the other guy."

"I guided a New York pilgrim on an' off for twenty years. Naturally, we got pretty close to each other in that time, an' I often wish they was a couple million more like him. A sportsman an' a gentleman that done you good just to know.

"Like the rest of us, he wasn't gettin' any younger, so the last few seasons all the huntin' we did hardly kept steak in the skillet, but he was plumb contented to be out where he could see the ice fields hangin' on the slopes of the Divide, cast the odd fly, an' smell balsam.

"Then one fall he brought out a nephew, fresh from college, and just rearin' to go. 'Work hell out of him Buck, an' don't let him think big-game hunting is too easy,' is the old chief's word to me, an' I sure done my best. When he wasn't going up we was sliding down, an' nine hours a day on a mountain sure was doing its stuff for the young feller's legs an' wind.

"ANY OF YOU BIRDS ever took an outfit to the head of Glacier Lake? Well, there isn't much of a trail, an' about the best way is to hit the edge of the water after you get past the stream at the outlet. The lake is plenty deep and two jumps from the edge you're into twenty feet of cold glacier-fed drink.

"He had got about two thirds of the way down the lake when I hear a splash an' a holler from the pack string, an' looked back to see three of the knotheds swimming.

"There was a big old dry spruce had blown down, an' fell from the bank out into the lake. We had weasled our way round the up-ended roots, but these three know-it-all cayuses decided the easiest way was to take to the lake an' swim round the windfall.

“It wouldn’t have been so bad, only old Tom got hung up by a loose bight of lash rope gettin’ wound up in a snag that was sticken out of the trunk, an’ while he was swimmin’ like hell he wasn’t gettin’ any place. That sort of put it up to me, so I slipped my skinning knife into my teeth and jumped in. I had quite a job cutting the fool horse loose, but just about the time I thought I should freeze stiff an’ drown with old Tom things came loose, an’ I grabbed a handful of tail, an’ we steamboated to shore together.

“While we were doing our Annette Kellerman act, the old chief had grabbed the most important pack horse in the outfit and had him stripped and the bottle out. The snifter he poured into me when I came ashore was one of those drinks that stick out in your mind like your first pair of spurs or your weddin’ day, an’ such events.

“As luck had it, we could make camp right there as there was a slide with horse feed on it, an’ plenty dry wood. Some of our duffle needed a drying, and the sugar was a dead loss. Next morning I sent the wrangler back toward the Saskatchewan to put up a couple of bars on the trail in case the ponies took a notion to back track, an’ suggested that the young feller take his rifle an’ go along to sneak up on the lick where the outlet from the lake hits the main river. You can often pick a goat up there, without busting yourself climbing a million feet.

“Then the cook an’ I started to do what we could to salvage the wet grub, an’ dry out our whatnots.

“Just after lunch we heard a flock of shots coming from the mountain above us, an’ I took the glasses to see if it was our outfit, or if somebody else was in the valley. I couldn’t locate anything, though, and didn’t think much about it for a while.

“Later on I wondered why the boys weren’t back in camp by now, an’ walked down the lake a bit to look around. Then way up on the rocks I spotted our two hunters, trying to work their way down. I got quite a jolt as I could see they couldn’t ever make it an’ they was dropping’ right for the edge of a sheer rock wall.

“Nephew was wearin’ a clean white sweat shirt, when he left camp that morning, an’ I could see this white spot sort of eatin’ along. Only once in a while I made out the wrangler. His clothes didn’t show up so good.

“It didn’t do any good to yell as they was too far up to tell what I said, so I just thought that when they found out it wasn’t any use they would climb back an’ come down the way they must have went up. Try an’ imagine what I felt like when just then I saw the white shirt slip, slide a few feet, and

then make a plunge, hit a little ledge an' bound out into nothing at all, then crash a hundred feet straight down. It struck a second, and then rolled slowly into a crevice out of sight. Man, oh man, you could have bought me for a lead dime.

"I high-tailed for camp, an' got a lariat, telling the biscuit builder to get another an' ooze out after me, not letting the old chief catch on. Then we tore up the slide like two cats that had been shot in the tail by boot-jacks. We figured we might, by the grace of God, get to where we could rope ourselves down to the crevice, and do what little seemed would want doin'. I knew that no man could make that fall and be worth anything to anybody except an undertaker. We went up places we would have been dizzy on, in cold blood. Finally, we had to hang up a minute to figure out just how to get from here to there, and suddenly remembered we had a wrangler somewhere on that mountain. I let a holler out of me, and he answered from above, and not so far way, although we couldn't see each other. Then imagine how bright old world looked when we heard our young pilgrim yell, 'Can we get down to you, Buck?'

"Hell's bells, no. Get to blazes back up an' come down the long hog-back on the east end. An' what the thus an' so you two damn fools think you doing anyway?' There ain't enough words in or out of old Webster's masterpiece to do justice to just how I felt. Also by the time old greasy an' I have got back to where we don't have to hang on by our finger nails and eyebrows, we have invented quite some new ones. Long after dark our heroes drag their tails into camp, an' we get the details.

"Just after they left camp the spotted a herd up to hell an' gone on the cliffs, an' decided to bust them one. After a lot of hard going, they plaster a billy, but he slips over a couple of ledges, an' it takes them quite some time to locate him. Not being very expert at skinning they decide to take plenty of hide with the head, and let me finish the job when they got to camp. Nephew makes a pack of it and the shirt, fastens his cartridge belt around it, and they decide they can get down without going way round the easy route. The going of course gets worse and no better, and at last they have to hand the hide and rifle to each other as one passes the other and gets set. What I saw was the wrangler handing it down to our pilgrim and both of 'em sort of fumbling the job, so away it went and what I thought was nephew in the sweat shirt was the hide of that defunct billy.

"I cussed the pair of 'em out plenty an' I guess that shirt, belt, and hide

are still in the crevice, an' if anybody wants it they can go get it. I ain't lost anything around there, me."

Joe grinned, and turning to Buck said, "Remember how the price of fur went up in '17? Well, I was sort of foot-loose that fall. The Army wouldn't take me, on account of them toes I froze off coming in from the Red Deer the winter before, so I figured I might as well run me a trap line. I went onto the Simpson and fixed up that old cabin at the forks, and run out a few loads of grub and traps before the snow flew. By the time I had got organized, and a pile of wood cut, and the line run, winter was on us with a whoop and holler. Things went good right from the start.

"One morning I found a pippin of a steel-blue lynx in the first set, and not wishing to spoil his hide by shooting him with the .45, I took off a snowshoe and rapped him over the nose with it. He sort of kicked over and I took his foot out of the trap, and went to resetting it. A lynx is funny about traps. Get him by two toes, and he plants right there. A coyote or wolverine would tear things all to hell and get out, but the cats quit cold. Anyway, while I am working on the trap, I see out of the corner of my eye puss get up and stagger for the timber. That was \$50 getting out of there, so I make a flying leap and grab him by the scuff of the neck and reach for my gun and beat him over the head with it. He dies again, and I finish the trap, pick him up by a front and hind leg, and sling him over my shoulders, figuring to take him to the shack and skin where it's warm.

"I've just got in sight of the cabin when that bobtailed hellion come to life again, and let out a snarl right in my ear, and reached round with his free front paw and ripped my Mackinaw right up the front. That's another time when I ain't scared, if you don't care what you say. I heaved that lynx forty feet up in the air and then piled on him again. This time, though, I sat in the middle of him till I got my gun unlimbered and shot him at a range of about two inches. You would have thought it was a moose yard where we fought the last battle—ten acres of snow tramped and rolled plumb flat. It's like Buck says, a man can get plenty scared."

To which Buck added, "I'm scared right now, that if you guys don't get off my bed an' let me grab a little sleep we won't get breakfast before we break camp tomorrow."

The Sportsman, September 1931, 52–54 and 58

