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"PEACE RIVER JOE"

BY

JOHN PEASE BABCOCK

*The Prize Winning
Story of the Imperial
Order Daughters of the
Empire 1924
competition.*

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By JOHN PEASE BABCOCK

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This little sketch is affectionately dedicated to my friends in remembrance of many happy days spent on the waters and in the woods of British Columbia.

—John Pease Babcock.

"PEACE RIVER JOE"

By John Pease Babcock.

I first met Peace River Joe in the fall of 1905 at his log cabin door on the bank of Clear River, in the Cariboo country of British Columbia. He was then a short, straight, spare, bronzed, good-looking man with large blue eyes, a typical Canadian trapper of twenty-four or twenty-five years of age. He gave us a warm welcome, with a pleasant smile and a firm grip of the hand, and assisted in removing the packs and saddles from the horses, which were then hobbled, belled and turned loose.

"You have come just in time for supper," he said, as we entered the cabin. "I have been expecting you for the last hour or two. The trail over the burned flat since the big blow of two weeks ago must be slow. I should have gone up and cut it out. It's not easy at any time."

The cabin we entered consisted of one room of some twenty by twelve feet, and was lighted by three small windows. There was a cook stove and a wall table at one end of the room, a rough deal table in the centre, and a double bed built against the wall in one corner. There were two large grizzly bear skins on the log walls; a badly mounted moose head with good-sized horns; an exceptionally fine pair of caribou antlers; the small spiked horns of a caribou cow; two gun racks with several rifles, and a bag or two hanging from the wooden pegs. A ladder gave access to a loft above, and tools and traps were stored under it.

Standing at the cook stove in the corner was a comely, short, stout young Lillooet Indian woman. The guide, Tommy, whom I had met some years before and who had "taken me on to start me off right with Joe," greeted her and said, "Mary, we hope you have a good supper ready." She smiled and nodded, and soon had a meal on the table.

She did not sit down with us. While we ate she sat on a stool near the stove and said not a word, in fact during the whole evening she did not enter the conversation.

Supper over and our pipes lighted we talked of the result of Joe's trappings; the price of furs; the moose, caribou and bear in the vicinity; and the salmon that had come up the river that fall. Then Tommy and myself took our blankets, climbed the ladder into the loft and went to bed. Mary and Joe slept in the room below.

After all was set for the night and the candle out, I lay in the comfortable bunk and recalled what Tommy had told me of Joe.

"He's a good sort, is Joe," he had said; "he came over here from the Peace River country some eight years ago. His father was a trapper who went into the Peace from Ontario with his wife. Joe was born there. His mother died when he was only a small kid. He lived with his father and a Peace River squaw who replaced Joe's mother. When his father died he came over here with the idea of mining, but the first winter went back to trapping. He has three good trap lines, prospects a little in the summer, and acts as a guide in the fall. He is a good hunter and woodsman, and a clever trapper, but cannot read or write. He has a Lillooet klotchman (squaw) living with him whom he picked up in Pittsville a year or two ago. He was brought up by a squaw man and his squaw, but he is a decent, clean chap. His 'klotch' is a fair cook and housekeeper, but 'some Indian' when she gets into town and can obtain liquor. Joe is 'some bird' himself when it comes to booze and a settlement, and Mary goes him one better and, being an Indian, usually lands in the Skookum house (jail). This spring Joe left her in Pittsville with some Indians while he took a look around the Horsefly country. When he came back Mary was in the skookum house. After he left she took up with a white man, and they both got drunk and were run in." Tommy continued, "I thought that would settle it with Joe, but it didn't. He paid her fine and took her back to the woods with him, though she had one eye that was blacker than usual and was otherwise the worse for her go. He said she was better than a winter alone, and no worse than he was."

Tommy returned to Pittsville a day or two later to fill an engagement as guide to some eastern men, leaving me with Joe. We spent the following three delightful and eventful weeks in hunting and fishing in that wonderful, well-watered and wooded big game country.

Late one afternoon, when Joe and myself were caught out through having tracked a wounded moose unsuccessfully for a long way, it began to rain hard. It was too late and too far to return to the main camp. At Joe's suggestion we made for an old deserted cabin, which we reached only through his familiarity with the country and his well-developed 'homing instinct'. The cabin had been long abandoned and its days of usefulness were over. The greater part of the roof had caved in and a part of the floor had been torn up. Ashes indicated that a fire had recently been built there by some former tenants who, like ourselves, had sought its questionable shelter in a time of need. We were wet to the skin, but our matches and tobacco were dry. Joe soon had a fire going, its smoke passing out through the uncovered end of the cabin. Though the rain continued and it was dark, Joe managed to get in wood enough to keep the fire going for most of the night. We sat there and smoked and talked, and notwithstanding the discomfort of our situation, I, at least, spent an enjoyable evening.

Joe told several good stories, and one, an amusing tale about a titled Englishman for whom he had acted as guide the year before, gives a side-light to his character and life that is worth recording here.

From his account Sir Francis was not at all a bad chap but, being accustomed all his life to the attentions of his valet, who was then at Joe's cabin, and other personal servants whom he directed in a military manner, Joe, who had never been under such discipline, took exception to his "trimmings", though he paid full tribute to his ability to shoot and fish.

The story related to an occurrence while they were fishing Clear River below Joe's cabin from a large canoe. The river there is wide and deep in places, a rapid stream that drops from one pool to another in short and long stretches of swift water. Sir Francis stood in the bow of the canoe while Joe sat in the stern and regulated its movements with a long unshod canoe pole. They were drifting downstream with the current. When in suitable water Joe held the canoe stationary while Sir Francis fished. They had not been very successful.

As they passed down a stretch which Joe knew did not usually afford any fish, Sir Francis barked out "Stop". But Joe did not at once stop, as the valet would have done under the circumstances. He let the canoe drift some little way to water which his experience indicated would give better results.

After making a few unprofitable casts Sir Francis turned to Joe and said sharply, "You should have stopped when I told you. You have passed over good water that I wished to fish. When I say "stop", you must stop. Do you understand?" Joe understood but resented the tone of Sir Francis, though he made no reply. Then at command Joe let the canoe drift to water below, where several good fish were hooked and landed.

Later they drifted into a deep stretch of rapid water. When about half way down Sir Francis, who was still standing in the bow, said "Stop her," Joe, on the instant, anchored his long pole in the rocks of the bed of the stream and brought the canoe to an abrupt stop. Sir Francis and his rod, as Joe had anticipated, shot out of the boat into the river and were buried from sight. As he came up to the surface Joe was alongside in an instant and, grabbing Sir Francis by the back, lifted him into the boat. Being a sportsman and a gentleman he took the incident with such grace as was possible.

"He sat there and dripped and sputtered for a while; he never swore or raised hell or nothin'," Joe concluded, "and then he said—"Joe, you most certainly stopped her that time."

We finally talked ourselves out and stretching out on the floor without cover, were soon asleep. Towards morning I was awakened by Joe stirring around. He was bent over the dying ashes trying to blow them into a flame. He succeeded and, as the light grew stronger, it lit with a ruddy glow his likeable but dirty face. It lighted also the dripping, cold cabin and enabled him to see me looking at him. With a broad good-natured equal-to-anything grin he said "Aint it hell when it snows in bed."

I left there that fall with regret, carrying with me a lasting and favorable impression of Joe. Though illiterate, he was a close observer, knew his country and its game well. His talk was always interesting and at times humorous. He told many good stories of life in the Peace River country. On our trips he never talked of Mary nor of women. He was never vulgar, and seldom profane. He was a clean, healthy-minded, good-natured, energetic, capable, and companionable woodsman.

When I visited that section again the following fall Joe had an old Scotchman living with him; Mary had gone. Tommy had told me so on reaching Pittsville, stating that Joe and Mary had come into town in the spring as usual to dispose of his pelts. The season's catch had been a good one; fur was high and the return large. Joe and Mary celebrated for a day or two in a more or less quiet way, then Joe went off in one of the new "buzz wagons", as he called the automobile, and was gone for some days. On his return he found Mary had departed with her white friend of the season before. He told me so himself later, saying "She went with a white man who lived nearer booze than I do. I lived in an Indian country, was mothered by an Indian woman, and have known no other women. I was naturally a squaw man, as my father was, but no more klotches for me. I want a white woman and wish I knew where I could get one that would live with a cuss like me, but that is impossible."

Tommy said "Nothing is impossible."

Joe replied, "You can't sleep with a porcupine."

Either Tommy or myself suggested that he might advertise for a wife, and Joe, who could neither read nor write, asked how that could be done. On its being explained to him it was agreed that Tommy should take the matter in hand and advertise in some of the weekly newspapers of the middle western states. What came from that advertisement is the burden of this story.

During the following winter Tommy wrote me that in answer to the advertisement in Joe's name, he had received several replies, and that Joe, who had come into town twice during the winter over the snow to learn what was going on, had taken a decided fancy to a woman from Kansas, and that in reply to the letters he had written and signed for Joe, the woman had asked for some references as to his character.

"Her letters," Tommy wrote me, "are written with a cramped hand, but they are well worded and indicate a woman of some education and sense. I have asked the Government Agent to write to her, and Joe wants you to write her."

I accordingly wrote encouragingly to the address he gave me, and endorsed Joe as a good, clean man and an excellent woodsman and companion, enclosing at the same time photographs I had taken of Joe and his country.

Later, in the spring, Tommy wrote me that matters had been settled, that Joe had sent on the passage money, met and married the woman at Ashcroft, and that they had gone home to his improved cabin.

I found them there in the fall. "Sue," as Joe called her, I found to be a large-framed, heavy-boned, comely, self-contained woman of nearly thirty years of age, with a wealth of well-kept light colored hair which was drawn close over her well formed head and knotted in a coil at the nape of her neck. Beneath a well developed brow her dark grey eyes were set far apart. Her prominent nose was wide at the bridge, with extended nostrils and slightly turned up. The broad mouth beneath was cut straight above a determined chin. The neck was short, and set on the broad shoulders of a short, muscular frame. There was rich color in her bronzed face. Her hands and feet were large. A woman, as Tommy had said, "Not good looking, but good to look at." She gave us a warm welcome, speaking with ease in a clear, pleasant voice that gave one the impression that she could sing.

The cabin had undergone a marked change. It was a different place. A lean-to had added a large bedroom to the lower floor on the east and a kitchen to the back, and the windows had been enlarged and hung with cheap curtains. Bear skins and braided rag rugs covered sections of the clean new floor. There were a few unframed prints on the walls, between the heads and skins that hung there; scalloped papers on the shelves of the dishes; a stiff paper shade over the tall lamp on the cloth-covered table; several wicker chairs; and most significant of all, there were books on a shelf beneath the stairs that had replaced the ladder to the loft. Everything about the room was spick and span, a cheery, well-kept inviting home. Joe's eyes sparkled and his frank pleasing face beamed when he said "This is my wife" and, turning to Sue, "This is my friend that comes for the huntin'. This is the man who took the pictures that caught you, and who likes our country so much he comes every year."

Sue had a fine supper awaiting us, which was served on a table covered with a white cloth, consisting of moose meat as was usual in that house, biscuits "like Mother used to make," and a blueberry pie that could not be excelled in the world.

Joe refused the Scotch whisky we offered him before sitting down. "No"; he said, "I've cut it out. It's no good. My booze days are over!" Sue smiled and nodded. Joe beamed again, saying, "That's all right, Sue. I'll make good on all I said. No booze for me!"

The next day on a canoe trip to the moose meadows and through the sloughs at the head of Clear Lake, Joe told me of his wooing and winning of Sue.

"Tommy did the trick," he said, "he set the trap with his piece in the paper. It was well baited with a good lead, and Sue walked in. She writ from Kansas that she was a farmer's daughter, and had left home and hired out as a cook when her people died. She was tired of the life, and that flat country. She wanted to get out into the wild woods, to the lake and the river that Tommy put in the paper. She fancied traps and fish and wild game, and she liked the pictures of me and the shack. Gee! man, I liked her face in the picture she sent and I liked it all at once, and it hasn't been out of my head since. She may not be pretty to you, but she looks great to me. I sent the money when she writ she would come out, and I was waitin' for her in Ashcroft for three days before she got there, and she come on time. I met her at the cars and knew her face, and she was the only woman that got off. I walked up to her with heart in my mouth and said, "I am Joe, and glad you have come."

Her face was mighty red when she said "Yes, I have come."

We took her things to the hotel, left them there, and then walked down to the treeless bank of the big Thompson River and sat down there and talked. I handed her the license I had got to get married, and gave her an envelope telling her there was three hundred dollars in it. Then I told her that Tommy had writ all the letters, that I couldn't read or write. I told her that I had been a squaw-man, and that Mary had left me for a man that would buy her more booze. It came hard to tell her I'd not always been a white man, but I told her I was ashamed of it and that I'd go straight and square and break the trail and tote the load all the way if she would marry me; that if she wouldn't, now she knew what a poor cuss I'd been she could take the three hundred dollars and go back home. She looked me in the eyes all the time I was sweatin' and talkin', and then she asked if Mary had any children, and thank God, I could tell her 'No'. Then she handed me the money and the license, and said she reckoned that all young men were like I had been, but that she would go ahead now she had come so far and I'd told her so much.

"So we went back and got married that afternoon and took a buzz-wagon and went to Clinton and come on here."

"I've walked on a good trail ever since," he continued. "She's the real thing, as you say, and I feel like a real man now. I am one too; she done it. She's a real wife, and when the baby comes we'll be 'some family', if you hear me talk."

On our trips that fall Joe did not talk all the time of Sue, though she was never far from his mind or his conversation. For the first time in the years I had known him he talked of books. Sue had read him two that she had brought from the east—"Davy Crockett" and "Daniel Boone", and Joe was full of them. Sue had opened a new world to him. "Had I read them? Were there any more as good?" and he added "Sue tells me she has read a lot and that there's so many books in the world that we can't live long enough to read 'em all. We're going to buy a lot, and she is showin' me how to read." And he added, in a voice that was almost child-like, "Do you think I'll ever make it?"

When they went into Pittsville for their provisions late that fall they found a case of books from Tommy and myself as an addition to our wedding gifts.

The first baby came the next spring. To Joe's joy, and also to Sue's, it was a boy, and they called him "Little Joe".

"The month before he come," Joe said, in telling me the story the fall afterwards, as we sat in the new canoe he had finished that summer, "we hiked and sledged it over the twenty-four miles of the trail to Pittsville, and Sue, she went to the hospital. When the time come, I was sure scared stiff and wanted to hit the booze, but didn't. I hung around the hospital, and when it was over and I saw her and the baby in the white bed I just cried like a fool. Later I pulled them both to the shack on a sled, the happiest man in Cariboo. She's 'some mother', and he's 'some kid', and if any more like him, or a little girl or two will come, they'll sure be welcome. I sure got some woman when I got Sue. She'll show the little kid how to read and write as she's showin' me, but it will be easier I hope. "We'll go to her school together," she says.

When we rowed out of the slough into the lake at dusk of that glorious afternoon, with the head of a big moose in the centre of the boat, and headed across, we could see a light in the cabin window. "They're waitin' for us. Gee, man, it's great," he said, and the look on his face proved how great it was.

The following spring news came that Joe had been badly injured by a trapped bear, and was in the hospital at Pittsville where little Joe was born. I did not get all the story until that fall, and then Joe told it to me while sitting on the steps leading up to the porch in front of his cabin door, holding little Joe in his lap while Sue was busy in the cabin.

"Along last April," he said, "I found tracks of a grizzly in the mud, on the Grouse Creek trap line some two miles below the cabin, and facin' the big rock cliff to the west. You've been there. It was down on the cottonwood flat above the river. He had taken a mink from my trap. I got out my big bear trap, and the next day I went down and set it. It was the big heavy trap with an eight-foot chain. I fastened the chain to the loose butt of a short log, to act as a drag if a bear got into the trap. I told Sue where the trap was set. She had been over all the lines many times with me and knew them well. I trapped two bear down that way last year, and she was down with me when I skinned one."

"The next morning I took my rifle and went down to the trap, telling Sue that if we had a big bear it would take me some time to skin it and lift the traps to the head of Grouse Creek. When I got down to the flat I found the trap gone, but the well-marked line of the drag led towards the cliff. I followed it up and soon came upon a big grizzly with its right front foot fast in the trap, and the drag snagged in a clump of low trees and brush. With a roar the bear tried to reach me, but the drag held. I shot him and he fell. I sized up the thing and left him lying there, and went to the head of the trap line, picked up a few small skins, and came back to the bear. He lay as I had left him. I leaned the gun against a tree, took out my big knife to skin him and, as I stooped over, he struck me a blow with his free forefoot and I went down and out."

"Sue waited for me until late in the afternoon, thinkin' I was busy skinnin' the bear. Then she put the fire out, fed little Joe, and placed him in the pen that we had for him on the floor, and started down the trail to help me along. She found me and the bear. The bear was dead, and she thought I was, as I lay in the brush all crumpled up and covered with blood. My scalp, pulled from the top of my head, was hanging over my eyes; my jacket was stripped off one side, showing a badly cut shoulder and broken arm, and my left foot was crushed and bloody. It was 'some find' for Sue, but she was good for it. She's a strong woman, as you know, and she started on as big a job that night as any man ever done. She tore up her skirt and bandaged me up, and somehow she packed me back to the cabin, and it was 'some job'. I come to, some time after she picked me up, down by the river, where she could wash my face. When I understood matters I helped by clinging to her with my right arm and standing now and then on my good foot while she rested. The early moon gave her light the last part of the way. It was 'some home-coming'. The kid had cried himself to sleep and lay curled up in the fur rug in his pen on the floor. Poor little Joe, he had had his first bad time. She made me a bed on the floor, washed and bandaged me up, and fed me and the kid with hot soup."

"We then talked matters over and decided that at daylight she was to go down the river and over the hill to Squaw Creek to the Owens Boys camp, some twelve miles away, for help, though she had never been over that ridge. She fed us again before leaving and placed within my reach the kid, and some food and water. She left us at grey daylight, saying 'Don't be afraid, I will come back with help.'"

"Me and the kid had some little time while she was gone. He, poor little chap, didn't know what was up, and I couldn't tell him. After she left I lay there and in my mind followed her down the trail that was so long the night before, to the bend in the river below the flat where the bear lay, and on up Grouse Creek, and wondered if she would find the only ford near the burnt log, and how she would get across that swollen creek. I could see her waist-deep struggling in that fierce water, and using the canoe pole she had taken with her from the cabin to help her across. Then I reckoned she had made it, and was across and going up the ridge towards the white rocks that was her direction. I followed her then up and down through that tangle of woods and devil's club brush on the Squaw Creek side to the flat where the Owens boys lived. Would she find them at home, and if not, how long must she wait, and when would they come back? Would she ever come back? What if she was washed down in the creek and drowned, and no help ever come to the kid and me? I knew I couldn't last many days as I was, and what of little Joe? Must he lay there and starve as I raved and was helpless? Then I remembered how strong she was, and that she had said 'Don't be afraid, I will come back with help.' Then I just knew she would come back. I kept telling the kid she would come back—'Muddy will come back', though the poor kid did not understand.

"The fire went out and the cabin grew cold, though we were wrapped up. It sure broke me up to have the kid cry so, for 'he is no cry baby' as Sue says. And I cried too, and the kid fell asleep again. Then my mind went back to the Peace River days. How quiet and strong my father was, and how good his squaw was to me! And then his death, and my trip out up the Peace and the Parsnip rivers to Fort McLeod and on to Giscombe Portage, Fort George, Quesnel, and into Pittsville. And then of you and Tommy, and how he would curse me for a fool for bein' hit by the bear! And then back to Sue, went my head. Where was she now? And then to the books she read to me,—'Lorna Doone', 'Bob, Son of Battle', 'The Call of the Wild', and most of all to 'Rab and his Friends' and how brave that little woman was when the good doctor cut off her breast, and how she thanked him and said she was sorry to give so much trouble!"

"And then, thank God, I heard someone run up the trail and Bill Owens came into the cabin. Sue had made it! Gee, he looked good to me, and I lay there and sobbed with the kid. Bill soon had the fire going and gave us a hot drink, and then the kid and I slept."

"Later on Sue and the older Owens brother came. He had made Sue rest at their cabin to eat, dry her shoes and stockings, and then travel back slow for the big job ahead."

"They soon put things to rights. They put splints on my arm and left leg. During the night they made Sue rest on the bed while they made up a long sled. Early next mornin' they bundled me up in blankets and cinched me on the sled. The kid was made in a pack for Sue, and we started for Pittsville. There was still some snow on the north side of the trail, and the Owens boys packed and dragged the sled and the eats, and Sue, she packed the kid."

"I don't remember much of that trip but the start. The next thing I knew I was in the white bed in the white room where little Joe was born, and Sue sat beside me smiling. Gee, man, I'll never forget that face! There was colour in it. It was different than the wet one I looked into on that trail from the flat to the cabin the night she packed me home. Gee, man she was 'some woman' on those trails! and she sure was 'some angel' there by my bed when she leaned over me and said 'Oh, Joe, do you know me?'"

"Man," he continued, while little Joe played with his strong scarred hand as he talked, and the western sky was lit with gold, "in the years you have been coming here you have put a lot of notions into my old head, but none so good as the night you told me to advertise for a wife. Sue, thank God, answered me and came out and married me though I was an ignorant cuss and had been a squaw man. She has made me white. She learned me to read and write, and she's made me a new world from those books, and she gave me the kid. Gee, man, she's 'some woman'."

Then Sue came to the door and, lifting little Joe in her arms, smiled, and called us in to supper.

[End of *Peace River Joe*, by John Pease Babcock]