

Ernest Thompson Seton



Krag and Johnny Bear

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KRAG

THE KOOTENAY RAM

PART I

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A great broad web of satin, shining white, and strewn across, long clumps and trailing wreaths of lilac—almost white—wistaria bloom—pendant, shining, and so delicately wrought in palest silk that still the web was white; and in and out and trailed across, now lost, now plain, two slender twining intertwining chains of golden thread.



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I see a broken upland in the far Northwest. Its gray and purple rocks are interpatched with colors rich and warm, the new-born colors of the upland spring, the greatest springtime in the world; for where there is no winter there can be no spring. The gloom is measure of the light. So, in this land of long, long winter night, where nature stints her joys for six hard months, then owns her debt and pays it all at once, the spring is glorious compensation for the past. Six months' arrears of joy are paid in one great lavish outpour. And latest May is made the date of payment. Then spring, great, gorgeous, six-fold spring holds carnival on every ridge.

Even the sullen Gunder Peak, that pierces the north end of the ridge, unsombres just a whit. The upland beams with all the flowers it might have grown in six lost months; yet we see only one. Here, by our feet and farther on, and right and left and onward far away, in great, broad acre beds, the purple lupin blooming. Irregular, broken, straggling patches near, but broader, denser farther on; till on the distant slopes they lie, long, devious belts, like purple clouds at rest.

But late May though it be, the wind is cold; the pools tell yet of frost at night. The White Wind blows. Broad clouds come up, and down comes driving snow. Over the peaks, over the upland and over the upland flowers. Hoary, gray, and white the landscape grows in turn; and one by one the

flowers are painted out. But the lupins on their taller, stiffer stems, can fight the snow for long, they bow their whitened heads beneath its load, then, thanks no little to the wind itself, shake free and stand up defiantly straight, and as fits their royal purple. And when the snowfall ends as suddenly as it began, the clouds roll by and the blue sky sees an upland shining white, but streaked and patched with blots and belts of lovely purple bloom.

And wound across, and in and out, are two long trails of track.



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Late snow is good trailing, and Scotty Macdougall took down his rifle, and climbed the open hill behind his shanty on Tobacco Creek toward the well-known Mountain Sheep range. The broad white upland, with its lupin bands and patches, had no claim on Scotty's notice, nor was his interest aroused until he came on the double trail in the new snow. At a glance he read it—two full-grown female Mountain Sheep, wandering here and there across the country, with their noses to the wind. Scotty followed the prints for a short time and learned that the Sheep were uneasy, but not alarmed, and less than an hour ahead. They had wandered from one sheltered place to another. Once or twice had laid down for a minute, only to rise and move on, apparently not hungry, as the abundant food was untouched.

Scotty pushed forward cautiously, scanning the distance and keeping watch on the trail without following it, when, all at once, he swung round a rocky point into view of a little lupin-crowded hollow and from the middle of it leaped the two Sheep.

Up went his rifle, and in a moment one or both would have fallen, had not Scotty's eye, before he pulled, rested on two tiny new-born Lambs that got up on their long wobbly legs, in doubt, for a moment, whether to go to the new-comer, or to follow their mothers.

The old Sheep bleated a shrill alarm to their young and circled back. The Lambs' moment of indecision was over, they felt that their duties lay with the creatures that looked and smelt like themselves, and coolly turned their uncertain steps to follow their mothers.

Of course Scotty could have shot any or all of the Sheep, as he was within twenty yards of the farthest, but there is in man an unreasoning impulse, a wild hankering to catch alive; and without thinking of what he could do with them afterward, Scotty, seeing them so easily in his power, leaned his gun in a safe place and ran after the Lambs. But the distressed mothers had by now communicated a good deal of their alarm to their young, the little things were no longer in doubt that they should avoid the stranger, and when he rushed forward, his onset added the necessary final touch and for the first time in their brief lives they knew danger and instinctively sought to escape it. They were not yet an hour old, but nature had equipped them with a set of valuable instincts. And though the Lambs were slow of foot compared with the man, they showed at once a singular aptitude at dodging, and Scotty failed to secure them at once as he had expected.

Meanwhile the mothers circled about, bleating piteously and urging the little ones to escape. Scotty, plunging around in his attempt, alarmed them more and more, and they put forth all the strength of their feeble limbs in the effort to go to their mothers. The man slipping and scrambling after them was unable to catch either, although more than once he touched one with his hand. But very soon this serious game of tag was adroitly steered by the timid mothers away

from the lupin bed, and once on the smooth, firmer ground, the Lambs got an advantage that quite offset the weariness they began to feel, and Scotty, dashing and chasing first this way and then that, did not realize that the whole thing was being managed by the old ones, till they reached the lowest spur of the Gunder Peak, a ragged, broken, rocky cliff, up which the mothers bounded. Then the little ones felt a new sense, just as a young duck must when first he drops in the water. Their little black rubber hoofs gripped the slippery rocks as no man's foot can do it, and they soared on their new-found mountain wings, up and away, till led by their mothers out of sight.

It was well for them that Scotty had lain aside his rifle, for a Sheep at 100 yards was as good as dead when he pulled on it. He now rushed back for his weapon, but before he could harm them, a bank of fog from the Peak came rolling between. The same White Wind that brought the treacherous trailing snow that had betrayed them to their deadliest foe, now brought the fog that screened them from his view.

So Scotty could only stare up the cliff and, half in admiration, mutter "the little devils, the little devils, too smart for me, and them less'n an hour old."

For now he fully knew the meaning of the restless wandering of the old ones, and the sudden appearance of two new tiny trails.

He spent the rest of the day in bootless hunting and at night went home hungry, to dine off a lump of fat bacon.



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The rugged peaks are not the chosen home, but rather the safe and final refuge of the Sheep. Once there the mothers felt no fear, and thenceforth, in the weeks that followed, they took care that in feeding, they should never wander far on the open away from their haven on the crags.

The Lambs were of a sturdy stock and grew so fast that within a week they were strong enough to keep up with their mothers when the sudden appearance of a Mountain Lion forced them all to run for their lives.

The snow of the Lambs' birthday had gone again within a few hours and all the hills were now carpeted with grass and flowers, the abundant food for the mothers meant plenty of the best for the little ones and they wagged their tails in satisfaction as they helped themselves.

One of the little fellows, whose distinguishing mark was a very white nose, was stockily built, while his playmate, slightly taller and more graceful, was peculiar in having little nubbins of horns within a few days of his birth.

They were fairly matched and frisked and raced alongside their mothers or fought together the live-long day. One would dash away and the other behind him try to butt him; or if they came on an inviting hillock they began at once the world-old, world-wide game of King of the Castle. One would mount and hold his friend at bay. Stamping and shaking his little round head, he would give the other to understand that *he* was "King of the Castle"—and then back