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SNOW BOUND AT EAGLE'S

BY BRET HARTE.

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CHAPTER L

For some moments profound silence and darkness had accompanied a Sierran stage coach toward the summit. The huge, dim bulk of the vehicle, swaying noiselessly on its straps, glided onward and upward as if obeying some mysterious impulse from behind, so faint and indefinite appeared its relations to the viewless and silent horses ahead. The shadowy trunks of tall trees, that seemed to approach the coach windows, look in, and then move hurriedly away, were the only distinguishable objects. Yet even these were so vague and unreal that they might have been the mere phantoms of some dream of the half-sleeping passengers; for the thicklystrewn needles of the pine, that choked the way and deadened all sound, yielded under the silently crushing wheels a faint soporific odor that seemed to benumb their senses, already slipping back into unconsciousness during the long ascent. Suddenly the stage stopped.

Three of the four passengers inside struggled at once into upright wakefulness. The fourth passenger, John Hale, had not been sleeping, and turned impatiently toward the window. It seemed to him that two of the moving trees had suddenly become motionless outside. One of them moved again, and the door opened quickly but quietly, as of itmif.

"Git down," said a voice in the darkness



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All the passengers except Hale started. The man next to him moved his right hand suddenly behind him, but as quickly stopped. One of the motionless trees had apparently closed upon the vehicle, and what had seemed to be a bough projecting from it at right angles changed slowly into the faintly shining double barrels of a gun at the window. "Drop that!" said the voice.

The man who had moved uttered a short laugh and returned his hand empty to his knees. The two others perceptibly shrugged their shoulders as over a game that was lost. The remaining passenger, John Hale, fearless by nature, inexperienced by habit, awaking suddenly to the truth, conceived a desperate resistance. But without his making a gesture this was instinctively felt by the others;

rage was plain enough to mates inexperience now. Yet he could not understand the cool acquiescence of his fellow passengers, and was furious. His reflections were interrupted by a voice which seemed to come from a greater distance. He fancied it was even softer in tone, as if a certain austerity was relaxed.

"Step in as quick as you like, gentlemen, You've five minutes to wait, Bill.

The passengers re-entered the coach; the driver and express messenger hurriedly climbed to their places. Hale would have spoken, but an impatient gesture from his companions stopped him. They were evidently listening for something; he listened

Yet the silence remained unbroken. It seemed incredible that there should be no indication near or far of that forceful presence which a moment ago had been so dominant. No rustle in the wayside "brush" nor ecto from the rocky canyon below betrayed a sound of their flight. A faint breeze stirred the tall tips of the pines, a cone dropped on the stage roof, one of the invisible horses, that seemed to be listening too, moved slightly in his harness. But this only appeared to accentuate the profound stillness. The moments were growing interminable, when the voice, so near as to startle Hale, broke on remore from the surrounding obscurity. "Good night!"

It was the signal that they were free. The driver's whip cracked like a pistol shot, the horses sprang furiously forward, the huge vehicle lurched ahead and then bounded violently after them. When Hale could make his voice heard in the confusion-a confusion which seemed greater from the colorless intensity of their last few moments' experience -he said hurriedly, "Then that fellow was there all the time?"

"I reckon," returned his companion, "he stopped five minutes to cover the driver with his double barrel, until the two other men got off with the treasure."

"The two others!" gasped Hale. "Then there were only three men, and we six." . The man shrugged his shoulders. The parsenger who had given up the greenbacks drawled, with a slow, irritating tolerance, "I reckou you're a stranger here?"

"I am-to this sort of thing, certainly, though I live a dozen miles from here, at Eagle's Court," returned Hale scornfully.

"Then you're the chap that's doin' that fancy ranchin' over at Eagle's," continued the man lazily.

"Whatever I'm doing at Eagle's Court I'm not ashamed of it," said Hale tartly; "and that's more than I can say of what I've done -or haven't done-to-night. I've been one of six men overawed and robbed by three."

"As to the overawin', ez you call it-mebbe you know more about it than us. As to the robbin'-ez far as I kin remember, you haven't onloaded much. Ef you're talkin' about what oughter've been done, I'll tell you what could have happened. P'r'aps ye noticed that when he pulled up I made a kind of grab for my wepping behind me?" "I did; and you weren't quick enough,"

said Hale shortly. "I wasn't quick enough, and that saved

you. For ef I got that pistol out and in sight o' that man that held the gun ----" "Well," said Hale impatiently, "ho'd have

hesitated." "He'd hev blown you with both barrels

sater the window, and that before I'd got a half cock on my revolver." "But that would have been only one man

gone, and there would have been five of you left," said Hale haughtily.

"That might have been of you'd contracted to take the hull charge of two handfuls of buckshot and slugs; but ez one-eighth of that amount would have done your business, and

please him. He had a Bostonian's respect for respectability, tradition and propriety, but was willing to face irregularity and impropriety to create order elsewhere. He was fond of nature with these limitations, never quite trusting her unguided instincts, and finding her as an instructress greatly inferior to Harvard university, though possibly not to Cornell. With dauntless enterprise and energy he had built and stocked a charming cottage farm in a nook in the Sierras, whence he opposed, like the lesser Englishman that he was, his own tastes to those of the alien west. In the present instance he felt it incumbent upon him not only to assert his principles, but to act upon them with his usual energy. How far he was impelled by the half contemptuous passiveness of his companions it would be difficult to say.

"What is to prevent the pursuit of them at once?" he asked suddenly. "We are a few miles from the station, where horses can be procured."

"Who's to do it?" replied the other lazily. The stage company will lodge the complaint with the authorities, but it will take two days to get the county officers out, and it's nobody elso's funeral."

"I will go for one," said Hale quietly. "I have a horse waiting for me at the station, and can start at once."

There was an instant of silence. The stage coach had left the obscurity of the forest, and by the stronger light Hale could perceive that his companion was examining him with two colorless, lazy eyes. Presently he said, meet ing Hale's clear glance, but rather as if yielding to a careless reflection:

"It might be done with four men. oughter raise one man at the station." He paused. "I don't know ez I'd mind taking a hand myself," he added, stretching out his legs with a slight yawn.

'Ye can count me in, if you're goin', kernel. I reckon I'm talkin' to Kernel Clinch," said the passenger beside Hale with sudden alacrity. "I'm Rawlins, of Frisco, Heerd of ye afore, kernel, and kinder spotted you jist now from your talk."

To Hale's surprise the two mon, after awkwardly and perfunctorily grasping each other's haud, entered at once into a languid conversation on the recent election at Fresno, without the slightest further reference to the pursuit of the robbers. It was not until the remaining and undenominated passenger turned to Hale, and, regretting that he had immediate business at the Summit, offered to accompany the party if they would wait a couple of hours, that Col. Clinch briefly returned to the subject.

"Four men will do, and ez we'll hev to take horses from the station we'll hev to take the fourth man from there."

With these words he resumed his uninteresting conversation with the equally uninterested Rawlins, and the undenominated passenger subsided into an admiring and dreamy contemplation of them both. With all his principle and really high minded purpose, Hale could not help feeling constrained and annoyed at the sudden, subordinate and auxiliary position to which he, the projector of the enterprise, had been reduced. It was true that he had never offered himself as their leader; it was true that the principle he wished to uphold and the effect he sought to obtain would be equally demonstrated under another; it was true that the execution of his own conception gravitated by some occult impulse to the man who had not sought it, and whom he had always regarded as an incapable. But all this was so unlike precedent or tradition that, after the fashion of conservative men, he was suspicious of it, and only that his honor was now involved he would have withdrawn from the enterprise. There was still a chance of reasserting him-

tiner touch, so to speak, in this yer rootery that wasn't in the old fashioned style. Down in my country they hed crude ideas about them things-used to strip the passengers of everything, includin' their clothes. They say bat at the station hotels, when the coaches ame in, the folks used to, stand round with lankets to wrap up the passengers so ez not to skeer the wimen. Thar's a story that the lriver and express manager drove up one day with only a copy of The Alty Californy wrapped around 'em; but thin," added Rawlins grimly, "there was folks ez said the hull story was only an advertisement got up for The Alty." "Time's up."

"Are you ready, gentlement" said Col. Hnch.

Hale started. He had forgotten his wife d family at Eagle's Court, ten miles away. ey would be alarmed at his absence, would rhaps hear some exaggerated version of the

tage coach robbery and fear the worst. "Is there any way I could send a line to

Lagie's Court before daybreak?' he asked agerly.

The station was already drained of its pare men and borses. The undenominated assenger stepped forward and offered to take it himself when his business, which be would dispatch as quickly as possible, waconcluded.

"That ain't a bad idea," said Clinch, reflectively, "for ef yer hurry you'll head 'en: off in case they scent us, and try to double back on the North ridge. They'll fight shy of the trail if they see anybody on it, an one man's as good as a dozen."

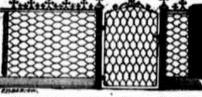
Hale could not help thinking that he might have been that one man, and had hi opportunity for independent action but for his rash proposal, but it was too late to with draw now. He hastily scribbled a few line to his wife on a sheet of the station papehanded it to the man, and took his place is the little cavalcade as it filed silently down the road.



And took his place in the cavilcade. They had ridden in silence for nearly :our, and had passed the scene of the rohery by a higher track. Morning had beago advanced its colors on the cold will peaks to their right, and was taking possion of the spur where they role.

"It looks like snow," said Rawlins quiet Hale turned toward him in astonishme Nothing on earth or sky looked less like i It had been cold, but that might have bee only a current from the frozen peaks beyond reaching the lower valley. The ridge of which they had halted was still thick w yellowish-green summer foliage, ming with the darker evergreen of pine and Oven-like canyons in the long flanks of) mountain seemed still to glow with the hof yesterday's noon; the breathless air crossibled and quivered over stifling gor. and masnes in the granite rocks, while fat





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muzzle of the gun turned spontaneously on him, and he was vaguely conscious of a certain contempt and impatience of him in his companions

"Git down," repeated the voice imperatively.

The three passengers descended. Hale, furious, alort, but helpless of any opportunity, followed. He was surprised to find the stage driver and express messenger standing beside him; he had not heard them dismonst. He institutively looked toward the horses. He could see nothing.

"Hold up your hands?"

One of the passengers had already lifted his, in a wenry, perfunctory way. The others did the same reluctantly and awkwardly, but apparently more from the consciousness of the hidicrousness of their attitude than from any sense of danger. The rays of a bull's eye lantern, deftly managed by invisible hands, while it left the intruders in shadow, completely illuminated the faces and figures of the passengers. In spite of the majestic obscurity and silence of surrounding nature, the group of humanity thus iliuminated was more fareleal than dramatic. A scrap of newspaper, part of a sandwich. and an orange peel that had fallen from the floor of the coach, brought into equal prominence by the searching light, completed the absurdity.

"There is a man here with a package of greenbacks," said a voice, with an official coolness that leat a certain suggestion of custom house inspection to the transaction; "who is it/" The passengers looked at each other, and their glance finally settled on Halo

"It's not him." continued the voice, with a slight tinge of contempt on the emphasis. "You'll save time and searching, gentlemen, if you'll tole it out. If we've got to go through every one of you we'll try to make if pay.

The significant threat was not unbeeded. The passenger who had first moved when the stage stopped put his hand to his breast.

"Tother pocket first, if you please," said the voice.

The man baughed, drew a pistol from his hip pocket, and, under the strong light of the lantern, laid it on a spot in the road indicated by the voice. A thick envelope, taken from his broast pocket, was laid beside it. "I told the d-d fools that gave it to me, instead of sending it by express, it would be at their own risk," he said apologetically.

"As it's using with the express now it's all the same. and the inevitable humorist of the occusion, jointing to the despoiled express treasure box alrendy in the road,

The lefention and deliberation of the out-

yet left enough to have gone round, promiskiss, and satisfied the other passengers, it wouldn't do to kalkilate upon."

"But the express messenger and the driver were armed," continued Hale.

"They were armed, but not fixed; that makes all the difference."

"I don't understand."

"I reekon you know what a duel is?" "Yes."

"Well, the chances agin us was about the same as you'd have of you was put up agin another chap who was allowed to draw a bead on you, and the signal to fire was your drawin' your weapon. You may be a stranger to this sort o' thing, and p'r'aps you never fought a duel, but even then you wouldn't go foolin' your life away on any such chances."

Something in the man's manner, as in A certain sly amusement the other passengers appeared to extract from the conversation, impressed Hale, already beginning to be concious of the hidierous insufficiency of his own griovance beside that of his interlocutor.

"Then you mean to say this thing is inevitable," said he bitterly, but less aggressively.

"Ez long ez they hunt you; when you hunt them you've got the advantage, allus provided you know how to get at them ex well as they know how to get ct you. This yes coach is bound to go regular, and on certain days. They ain't. By the time the sherift gets out his posse they've skedaddled, and the ender, li æ as not, is takin' his quiet cocktail at the Bank Exchange, or mebbe losin' his earnings to the sheriff over draw poker in Sacramento. You see you can't prove anything agin them unless you take them 'on the It may be a part of Joaquim Murietta's its." band, though I wouldn't swear to it."

"The leader might have been Gentleman George, from up country," interposed a passenger. "He seemed to throw in a few faucy touches, particlerly in that 'Good night.' Sorter chucked a little sentiment in it. Didn't seem to be the same thing or Git, yer d-d suckers,' on the other line,

"Whoever he was he know the road and the men who traveled on it. Like ex not he went over the line beside the driver on the hox on the down trip, and took stock of everything He even knew I had those greenbacks, though they were handed to me in the bank at Sacramento. He must have been hangin' round there.

For some moments Hale remained silent. He was a civic-bred man, with an intense lave of law and order; the kind of man who is the first to take that law and order into his own bands when he does not find it existing to a

self at the station, where he was known, and where some authority might be deputed to him.

But even this prospect failed. The station half hotel and half stable, contained only the landlord, who was also express agent, and the new volunteer whom Clinch had suggested would be found among the stable men. The nearest justice of the peace was ten miles away, and Hale had to abandon even his hope of being sworn in as a deputy constable. This introduction of a common and illiterate ostler into the party on equal terms with himself did not add to his satisfaction, and a remark from Rawlins seemed to complete his embarrasement.

"Ye had a mighty narror escape down there just now," said that gentleman confidentially, as Hale buckled his saddle girths. "I thought, as we were not supposed to defend ourselves, there was no danger," said Hale scornfully

"Oh, I don't mean them road agents. But him."

"Who?"

"Kernel Clinch. You jist eg good as allowed he hadn't any grit."

"Whatever I said, I suppose I am responsible for it," answered Hale haughtily.

"That's what gits me." was the imperturbable reply. "He's the best shot in southern California, and hez let daylight through a dozen chaps afore now for half what you said

"Indent?"

"Howsaumever," continued Rawlins, philosophically, "ez he's concluded to go with ye instead of for ye, you're likely to hev your ideas on this matter carried out up to the handle. He'll make short work of it, you Let. Ef, es I suspect, the leader is an airy young feller from Frisco, who her took to the road lately, Clinch her got a personal grudge agin him from a quartel over draw poker." This was the last blow to Hale's ideal ernsade. Here he was-an honest, respectable citizen engaged as simple accessory to a lawless vendetta originating at a gunbling table! When the first shock was over that grim philosophy which is the reaction of all maginative and sensitive natures came to his aid. He felt better: oddly enough he began to be conscious that he was thinking and acting like his companions. With this feeling a vague sympathy, before absent, faintly showed itself in their actions. The Sharpe's rifle put into his hands by the stableman was accompanied by a familiar word of suggestion as to an equal, which he was ashamed to find flattered him. He was able to continue the conversation with the wines more cooliv. "Then you suspect who is the leader?" "Only on giniral principles. There was a

their feet sixty miles of perpetual sume stretched away over the winding America river, now and then lost in a gossamer br. it was sensedly ripe. Obtober where the coad; they could see the plenitade of Auguall ingraing in the valleys.

"I've seen Thomson's pass choked up w (from feet of show earlier than this," flawlint, answering Hule's game: "and ! 5 provider the presengers sledded over in the time list hight, and all the tiheavies, a title lower flown over the red the hollow, anothing his pipe under rois his pressed. Monutaines is unightly to matter they make their own weather: ton mant it. I rection you ain't winter-NO: YOR

tints was obliged to admit that he hi by takon Electrics Court in the early sprin Ob you're all right at Eagle's wh "," there' But it's like Thomson'se gential there that's-I allof What's that Y shut, distant but distinct, had cut cromply the keeps air. It was followed 1 miler so tilk on towen an echo.

That's over you, on the North ridge aid the astler, "along two miles as the ereis and five by the trail. Someboly lowshith blats"

"Not with a shot gun," said Clinch, quickly cheeping his horse with a gesture that elevitied them. "Rischens, and they've double on ust. Yo the North ridge, gentlemen, and tide all your know?"

It messiod not second challenge to comdetely transform that quiet eavalende. The wild, new-hunting instinct, inseparable most humanity, rose at their leader's lo rust word. With an incoherent and reilulights exy, giving voice to the chase like t commonest hound of their fields, the ordloving Hale and the uhilosophical Rawlwheeled with the others, and in another in dant the little band swept out of sight in th Libered.

An immense and immeasurable quiet sur walsh. The sunlight glistened silently or diff and some, the vast distance below seem to strench out and broaden into repose. It might have been fancy, but over the sharp line of the North ridge a light smoke lifted as of an escaping soul.

Velvet Workers.

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