

SNOW BOUND AT EAGLE'S

BY BRET HARTE.

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"Now, then," said Lee, with a broad, graceful smile, laying down his whip and pistol within reach and comfortably settling the pillows behind his back, "we'll have a quiet confab. A sort of old-fashioned talk, eh? You're not looking well, Manuel. You're drinking too much again. It spoils your complexion."

"Let me go, captain," pleaded the man, emboldened by the good humored voice, but not near enough to notice a peculiar light in the speaker's eye.

"You've only just come, Manuel, and at considerable trouble, too. Well, what have you got to say? What's all this about? What are you doing here?"

The captured man shuffled his feet nervously, and only uttered an uneasy laugh of coarse discomfort.

"I see. You're bashful. Well, I'll help you along. Come! You know that Hale was away and these women were here without a man to help them. You thought you'd find some money here, and have your own way generally, eh?"

The tone of Lee's voice inspired him to confidence; unfortunately, it inspired him with familiarity also.

"I reckoned I had the right to a little fun on my own account, cap. I reckoned as one gentleman in the profession wouldn't interfere with another gentleman's little game," he continued coarsely.

"Stand up."

"Wot for?"

"Up, I say!"

Manuel stood up and glanced at him.

"Utter a cry that might frighten these women, and by the living God they'll rush in here only to find you lying dead on the floor of the house you'd have polluted."

He grasped the whip and laid the lash of it heavily twice over the ruffian's shoulders. Writhing in suppressed agony, the man fell imploringly on his knees.

"Now, listen!" said Lee, softly twirling the whip in the air. "I want to refresh your memory. Did you ever learn, when you were with me—before I was obliged to kick you out of gentlemen's company—to break into a private house? Answer!"



"Now, listen!" said Lee.

"No," stammered the wretch. "Did you ever learn to rob a woman, a child, or any but a man, and that face to face?"

"No," repeated Manuel.

"Did you ever learn from me to lay a finger upon a woman, old or young, in anger or kindness?"

"No."

"Then, my poor Manuel, it's as I feared; civilization has ruined you. Farming and a simple, bucolic life have perverted your morals. So you were running off with the stock and that mustang, when you got stuck in the snow; and the luminous idea of this little game struck you? Eh? That was another mistake, Manuel; I never allowed you to think when you were with me."

"No, captain."

"Who's your friend?"

"A d-d cowardly nigger from the Summit."

"I agree with you for once; but he hasn't had a very brilliant example. Where's he gone now?"

"To h—ll, for all I care!"

"Then I want you to go with him. Listen. If there's a way out of the place you know it or can find it. I give you two days to do it—you and he. At the end of that time the order will be to shoot you on sight. Now take off your boots."

The man's dark face visibly whitened, his teeth chattered in superstitious terror.

"I'm not going to shoot you now," said Lee, smiling, "so you will have a chance to die with your boots on, if you are superstitious. I only want you to exchange them for that pair of Hale's in the corner. The fact is I have taken a fancy to yours. That fashion of wearing the stockings outside strikes me as one of the neatest things out."

Manuel sullenly drew off his boots with their muffled covering, and put on the ones designated.

"Now open the door."

He did so. Falkner was already waiting at the threshold. "Turn Manuel loose with the other, Ned, but disarm him first. They might quarrel. The habit of carrying arms, Manuel," added Lee, as Falkner took a pistol and bowie knife from the half-breed, "is of itself provocative of violence and inconsistent with a bucolic and pastoral life."

When Falkner returned he said hurriedly to his companion: "Do you think it wise, George, to let those hellhounds loose? Good God! I could scarcely let my grip of his throat go when I thought of what they were hunting."

"My dear Ned," said Lee, luxuriously ensconcing himself under the bedclothes again with a slight shiver of delicious warmth. "I must warn you against allowing the natural pride of a higher walk to prejudice you against the general level of our profession. Indeed, I was quite struck with the justice of Manuel's protest that I was interfering with certain rude processes of his own toward results aimed at by others."

"George?" interrupted Falkner almost savagely.

"Well, I admit it's getting rather late in the evening for pure philosophical inquiry, and you are tired. Practically, then, it was wise to let them get away before they discovered two things. One, our exact relations here with these women; and the other, how many of us were here. At present they think we are three or four in possession and with the consent of the women."

"The dogs!"

"They are paying us the highest compliment they can conceive of by supposing us cleverer scoundrels than ourselves. You are very unjust, Ned."

"If they escape and tell their story?"

"We shall have the rare pleasure of knowing we are better than people believe us. And now put those boots away somewhere where we can produce them if necessary, as evidence of Manuel's evening call. At present we'll keep the thing quiet, and in the early morning you can find out where they got in and remove any traces they have left. It is no use to frighten the women. There's no fear of their returning."

"And if they get away?"

"We can follow in their tracks."

"If Manuel gives the alarm?"

"With his burglarious boots left behind in the house? Not much! Good night, Ned. Go to bed."

With these words Lee turned on his side and quietly resumed his interrupted slumber.

Falkner did not, however, follow this sensible advice. When he was satisfied that his friend was sleeping he opened the door softly and looked out. He did not appear to be listening, for his eyes were fixed upon a small pencil of light that stole across the passage from the foot of Kate's door. He watched it until it suddenly disappeared, when, leaving the door partly open, he threw himself on his couch without removing his clothes. The slight movement awakened the sleeper, who was beginning to feel the accession of fever. He moved restlessly.

"George," said Falkner, softly.

"Yes."

"Where was it we passed that old Mission church on the road one dark night, and saw the light burning before the figure of the Virgin through the window?"

"There was a moment of crushing silence. 'Does that mean you're wanting to light the candle again?'"

"No."

"Then don't lie there inventing sacrilegious conundrums, but go to sleep."

Nevertheless, in the morning his fever was slightly worse. Mrs. Hale, offering her condolence, said, "I know that you have not been resting well, for even after your friend met with that mishap in the hall, I heard your voices and Kate says your door was open all night. You have a little fever, too, Mr. Falkner."

George looked curiously at Falkner's pale face—it was burning.

CHAPTER V.

The speed and fury with which Clinch's cavalcade swept on in the direction of the mysterious shot left Hale no chance for reflection. He was conscious of shouting incoherently with the others, of urging his horse irresistibly forward, of momentarily expecting to meet or overtake something, but without any further thought. The figures of Clinch and Rawlins immediately before him shut out the prospect of the narrowing trail. Once only, taking advantage of a sudden halt that threw them confusively together, he managed to ask a question.

"Lost their track—found it again!" shouted the ostler, as Clinch, with a cry like the baying of a hound, again darted forward. Their horses were panting and trembling under them, the ascent seemed to be growing steeper, a singular darkness, which even the density of the wood did not sufficiently account for, surrounded them, but still their leader madly urged them on. To Hale's returning senses they did not seem in a condition to engage a single resolute man, who might have ambushed in the woods or beaten them in detail in the narrow gorge, but in another instant the reason of their furious haste was manifest. Spurring his horse ahead, Clinch dashed out into the open with a cheering shout—a shout that as quickly changed to a yell of imprecation. They were on the Ridge in a blinding snowstorm! The road had already vanished under their feet, and with it the fresh trail they had so closely followed! They stood helplessly on the shore of a trackless white sea, blank and spotless of any trace or sign of the fugitives.

"Fears to me, boys," said the ostler, suddenly ranging before them, "if you're not kalkilin' on gittin' another party to dig ye out, ye'd better be huntin' foddler and cover instead of road agents. 'Skuse me, gentlemen, but I'm responsible for the horses, and this ain't no time for circus ridin'. We're a matter o' six miles from the station in a bee line."

"Back to the trail, then," said Clinch, wheeling his horse toward the road they had just quitted.

"'Skuse me, Kernel," said the ostler, laying his hand on Clinch's rein, "but that way only brings us back the road we ken—the stage road—three miles further from home. That three miles is on the divide, and by the time we get there it will be snowed up worse nor this. The shortest cut is along the Ridge. If we hump ourselves we ken cross the divide afore the road is blocked. And that, 'skuse me, gentlemen, is my road."

There was no time for discussion. The road was already palpably thickening under their feet. Hale's arm was stiffened to his side by a wet, clinging snow wreath. The figures of the others were almost obliterated and shapeless. It was not snowing—it was snowballing! The huge flakes, shaken like enormous feathers out of a vast blue black cloud, commingled and fell in sprays and patches. All idea of their former pursuit was forgotten; the blind rage and enthusiasm that had possessed them was gone. They dashed after their new leader with only an instinct for shelter and succor.

They had not ridden long when fortunately, as it seemed to Hale, the character of the storm changed. The snow no longer fell in such large flakes, nor as heavily. A bitter wind succeeded; the soft snow began to stiffen and crackle under the horses' hoofs; they were no longer weighted and encumbered by the drifts upon their bodies; the smaller flakes now rustled and rasped against them like sand, or bounded from them like

ball. They seemed to be moving more easily and rapidly, their spirits were rising with the stimulus of cold and motion, when suddenly their leader halted.

"It's no use, boys. It can't be done! This is no blizzard, but a regular two days' snifter! It's no longer meltin', but packin' and driftin' now. Even if we get over the divide, we're sure to be blocked up in the pass."

It was true! To their bitter disappointment they could now see that the snow had not really diminished in quantity, but that the now finely powdered particles were rapidly filling all inequalities of the surface, packing in long furrows across the levels. They looked with anxiety at their self-constituted leader.

"We must make a break to get down in the woods again before it's too late," he said briefly.

But they had already drifted away from the fringe of larches and dwarf pines that marked the sides of the Ridge, and lower down merged into the dense forest that clothed the flank of the mountain they had lately climbed, and it was with the greatest difficulty that they again reached it, only to find that at that point it was too precipitous for the descent of their horses. Bumbled and speechless, they continued to toll on, opposed to the full fury of the stinging snow, and at times obliged to turn their horses to the blast to keep from being blown over the Ridge. At the end of half an hour the ostler dismounted, and, beckoning to the others, took his horse by the bridle and began the descent. When it came to Hale's turn to dismount he could not help at first recoiling from the prospect before him. The trail—if it could be so called—was merely the track or furrow of some fallen tree, dragged, by accident or design, diagonally across the sides of the mountain. At times it appeared scarcely a foot in width; at other times a mere crumbling gully, or a narrow shelf made by the projections of dead boughs and collected debris. It seemed perilous for a foot passenger; it appeared impossible for a horse. Nevertheless, he had taken a step forward when Clinch laid his hand on his arm.

"You'll bring up the rear," he said, not unkindly, "as you're a stranger here. Wait until we sing out to you."

"But if I prefer to take the same risks as you all?" said Hale, stiffly.

"You kin," said Clinch, grimly. "But I reckoned, as you weren't familiar with this sort o' thing, you wouldn't keer, by any foolishness o' yours, to stamper the rocks ahead of us, and break down the trail, or send down an avalanche on top of us. But just ez you like."

"I will wait, then," said Hale, hastily. The rebuke, however, did him good service. It preoccupied his mind, so that it remained unaffected by the dizzy depths, and enabled him to abandon himself mechanically to the sagacity of his horse, who was contented simply to follow the hoofprints of the preceding animal, and in a few moments they reached the broader trail below without a mishap. A discussion regarding their future movements was already taking place. The impossibility of regaining the station at the Summit was admitted; the way down the mountain to the next settlement was still left to them, or the adjacent woods, if they wished for an encampment. The ostler once more assumed authority.

"'Skuse me, gentlemen, but them horses don't take no pascer down the mountain to-night. The stage road ain't no mile off, and I kalkilate to wait here till the up stage comes. She's bound to stop on account of the snow; and I've done my dooty when I hand the horses over to the driver."

"But if she hears of the block up yer, and waits at the lower station?" said Rawlins.

"Then I've done my dooty all the same. 'Skuse me, gentlemen, but them ez her their own horses kin do ez they like."

As this clearly pointed to Hale, he briefly assured his companions that he had no intention of deserting them. "If I cannot reach Eagle's Court I shall at least keep as near it as possible. I suppose any messenger from my house to the Summit will learn where I am and why I am delayed!"

"Messenger from your house?" gasped Rawlins. "Are you crazy, stranger? Only a bird would get out Eagle's now; and it would hev to be an eagle at that! Between your house and the Summit the snow must be ten feet by this time, to say nothin' of the drift in the pass."

Hale felt it was the truth. At any other time he would have worried over this unexpected situation, and in utter violation of all his traditions. He was past that now, and even felt a certain relief. He knew his family were safe; it was enough. That they were locked up securely, and incapable of interfering with him, seemed to enhance his new, half-conscious, half-shy enjoyment of an adventurous existence.

The ostler, who had been apparently lost in contemplation of the steep trail he had just descended, suddenly clasped his hand to his leg with an ejaculation of gratified astonishment.

"Waal, darn my skin of that ain't Hennicker's 'slide' all the time! I heard it was some what about here."

Rawlins briefly explained to Hale that a slide was a rude incline for the transit of heavy goods that could not be carried down a trail.

"And Hennicker's," continued the man, "ain't more nor a mile away. Ye might try Hennicker's at a push, eh?"

By a common instinct the whole party looked dubiously at Hale. "Who's Hennicker?" he felt compelled to ask.

The ostler hesitated and glanced at the others to reply. "There are folks," he said lazily at last, "ez believes that Hennicker ain't much better nor the crowd we're huntin'; but they don't say it to Hennicker. We needn't let on what we're after."

"I for one," said Hale stoutly, "decidedly object to any concealment of our purpose."

"It don't follow," said Rawlins carelessly, "that Hennicker even knows of this yer robbery. It's his general gait we refer to. Ef yer think it more polite, and it makes it more sociable to discuss this matter afore him, I'm agreed."

"Hale means," said Clinch, "that it wouldn't be on the square to take and make use of any points we might pick up there agin the road agents."

"Certainly," said Hale. It was not at all

what he had meant, but he felt singularly relieved at the compromise.

"And ez I reckon Hennicker ain't such a fool as not to know who we are and what we're out for," continued Clinch, "I reckon there ain't any concealment."

"Then it's Hennicker's!" said the ostler, with swift deduction.

"Hennicker it is! Lead on."

The ostler remounted his horse and the others followed. The trail presently turned into a broader track, that bore some signs of approaching habitations, and at the end of five minutes they came upon a clearing. It was part of one of the fragmentary mountain terraces, and formed by itself a vast niche, or bracketed shelf, in the hollow flank of the mountain that, to Hale's first glance, bore a rude resemblance to Eagle's Court. But there was neither meadow nor open field; the few acres of ground had been wrested from the forest by ax and fire, and unsightly stumps everywhere marked the rude and difficult attempts at cultivation. Two or three rough buildings of unplanned and unpainted boards, connected by rambling sheds, stood in the center of the amphitheatre. Far from being protected by the encircling rampart, it seemed to be the selected arena for the combat elements. A whirlwind from the outer abyss continually filled this cave of Æolus with driving snow, which, however, melted as it fell, or was quickly whirled away again.

A few dogs barked and ran out to meet the cavalcade, but there was no other sign of any life disturbed or concerned at their approach.

"I reckon Hennicker ain't home or he'd hev been on the lookout afore this," said the ostler, dismounting and rapping at the door.

After a silence a female voice, unintelligible to the others, apparently had some colloquy with the ostler, who returned to the party.

"Must go in through the kitchen—can't open the door for the wind."

Leaving their horses in the shed, they entered the kitchen, which communicated, and presently came upon a square room filled with smoke from a fire of green pine logs. The doors and windows were tightly fastened; the only air came in through the large throated chimney in voluminous gusts, which seemed to make the hollow shell of the apartment swell and expand to the point of bursting. Despite the stinging of the resinous smoke, the temperature was grateful to the benumbed travelers. Several cushionless arm chairs, such as were used in barrooms, two tables, a sideboard, half bar and half cupboard, and a rocking chair comprised the furniture, and a few bear and buffalo skins covered the floor. Hale sank into one of the arm chairs, and, with a lazy satisfaction, partly born of his fatigue and partly from some newly discovered appreciative faculty, gazed around the room, and then at the mistress of the house, with whom the others were talking.

She was tall, gaunt and withered; in spite of her evident years, her twisted hair was still dark and full, and her eyes bright and piercing; her complexion and teeth had long since succumbed to the vitiating effects of frontier cookery, and her lips were stained with the yellow juice of a brierwood pipe she held in her mouth. The ostler had explained their intrusion, and velleled their character under the vague epithet of a "hunting party," and was now evidently describing them personally. In his new found philosophy the fact that the interest of his hostess seemed to be excited only by the names of his companions, that he himself was carelessly, and even deprecatingly, alluded to as the "stranger from Eagle's" by the ostler, and completely overlooked by the old woman, gave him no concern.

"You'll have to talk to Zenobia yourself. Doot rot of I'm gine to interfere. She knows Hennicker's ways, and if she chooses to take in transients it ain't no funeral o' mine. Zeenie! You, Zeenie! Look yer!"

A tall, lazy looking, handsome girl appeared on the threshold of the next room, and with a hand on each door post, slowly swung herself backward and forward, without entering. "Well, maw."

The old woman briefly and unallegedly pictured the condition of the travelers.

"Paw ain't here," began the girl, doubtfully, "and—How dy, Dick! Is that you?" The interruption was caused by her recognition of the ostler, and she lounged into the room. In spite of a skimp, slatternly gown, whose straight skirt clung to her lower limbs, there was a quaint, nymph-like contour to her figure. Whether from languor, ill health, or more probably from a morbid consciousness of her own height, she moved with a slightly affected stoop that had become a habit. It did not seem ungraceful to Hale, already attracted by her delicate profile, her large dark eyes, and a certain weird resemblance she had to some half-domesticated dray.

"That'll do, maw," she said, dismissing her parent with a nod. "I'll talk to Dick."

As the door closed on the old woman Zenobia leaned her hands on the back of a chair, and confronted the admiring eyes of Dick with a goddess-like indifference.

"Now, wot's the use of your playin' this yer game on me, Dick? Wot's the good of your ladin' out that hog wash about huntin'?"

"Wot's the good of your ladin' out that hog wash about huntin'?"

"Huntin'! I'll tell yer the huntin' you-uns hev been at! You've been huntin' George Lee and his boys since an hour afore sun up. You've been followin' a blud trail up to the

Ridge, until the snow got up and hunted you right here! You've been whoopin' and yellin' and circus ridin' on the roads like ez yer wot Comanches, and frightenin' all the women folk within miles—that's yer huntin'! You've been climbin' down paw's old slide at last, and makin' tracks for here to save the skins of them condemned government horses of the kampany! And that's your huntin'!"

To Hale's surprise a burst of laughter from the party followed this speech. He tried to join in, but this ridiculous summary of the result of his enthusiastic sense of duty left him—the only earnest believer—mortified and embarrassed. Nor was he the less concerned as he found the girl's dark eyes had rested once or twice upon him curiously.

Zenobia laughed too, and, lazily, turning the chair around, dropped into it. "And by this time George Lee's loungin' back in his chyar and smokin' his cigar somewhar in Sacramento," she added, stretching her feet out to the fire, and suiting the action to the word with an imaginary cigar between the long fingers of a thin and not over clean hand.

"We cave, Zeenie!" said Rawlins, when their hilarity had subsided to a more subdued and scarcely less flattering admiration of the unconcerned goddess before them. "That's about the size of it. Ye kin rake down the pile. I forgot you're an old friend of George's."

"He's a white man!" said the girl decidedly.

"Ye used to know him?" continued Rawlins.

"Once. Paw ain't in that line now," she said simply.

There was such a sublime unconsciousness of any moral degradation involved in this allusion that even Hale accepted it without a shock. She rose presently, and, going to the little sideboard, brought out a number of glasses; these she handed to each of the party, and then, producing a demijohn of whisky, slung it dexterously and gracefully over her arm, so that it rested on her elbow like a cradle, and, going to each one in succession, filled their glasses. It obliged each one to rise to accept the libation, and as Hale did so in his turn he met the dark eyes of the girl full on his own. There was a pleased curiosity in her glance that made this married man of 35 color as awkwardly as a boy.

The tender of refreshments being understood as a tacit recognition of their claims to a larger hospitality, all further restraint was removed. Zenobia resumed her seat, and placing her elbow on the arm of her chair, and her small round chin in her hand, looked thoughtfully in the fire. "When I say George Lee's a white man, it ain't because I know him. It's his general gait. Wot's he ever done that's underhand or mean? Nothin'! You can't show the poor man he's ever took a picayune from. When he's helped himself to a pile it's been outer them banks or them express companies, that think it mighty fine to bust up themselves and swindle the poor folks o' their last cent, and nobody talks o' huntin' them! And does he keep their money? No; he passes it round among the boys that help him, and they put it in circulation. He don't keep it for himself; he ain't got fine houses in Frisco; he don't keep fast horses for show. Like ez not the critter he did that job with—ef it was him—none of you boys would have rid! And he takes all the risks himself; you ken bet your life that every man with him was safe and away afore he turned his back on you us."

"He certainly drops a little of his money at draw poker, Zeenie," said Clinch, laughing.

"He lost \$5,000 to Sheriff Kelly last week."

"Well, I don't hear of the sheriff huntin' him to give it back, nor do I reckon Kelly handed it over to the express it was taken from. I heard you won uthin' from him a spell ago. I reckon you've been huntin' him to find out whar you should return it." The laugh was clearly against Clinch. He was about to make some rallying rejoinder when the young girl suddenly interrupted him. "Ef you're wantin' to hunt somebody, why don't you take higher game? That's that Jim Harkins; go for him, and I'll join you."

"Harkins!" exclaimed Clinch and Hale, simultaneously.

"Yes, Jim Harkins; do you know him?" she said, glancing from the one to the other.

"One of my friends do," said Clinch, laughing; "but don't let that stop you."

"And you—over there," continued Zenobia, bending her head and eyes toward Hale. "The fact is—I believe he was my banker," said Hale, with a smile. "I don't know him personally."

"Then you'd better hunt him before he does you."

"What's he done, Zeenie?" asked Rawlins, keenly enjoying the discomfiture of the others.

"What?" She stopped, threw her long black braids over her shoulder, clasped her knee with her hands, and rocking backward and forward, sublimely unconscious of the apparition of a slim ankle and half dropped off slipper from under her shortened gown, continued: "It mightn't please him," she said, slyly, nodding toward Hale.

"Pray don't mind me," said Hale, with unnecessary eagerness.

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