

# SNOW BOUND AT EAGLE'S

BY BRET HARTE

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## CHAPTER I

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 thickly strewn 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 itself.

"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; the 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, alert, 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 dismount. He instinctively looked toward the horses. He could see nothing.

"Hold up your hands!"

One of the passengers had already lifted his, in a weary, perfunctory way. The others did the same reluctantly and awkwardly, but apparently more from the consciousness of the ludicrousness 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 illuminated was more farcical 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 lent 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 Hale.

"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 tote it out. If we've got to go through every one of you we'll try to make it pay."

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

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

The man laughed, 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 breast pocket, was held beside it.

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 going with the express now it's all the same," said the inevitable humorist of the occasion, pointing to the despoiled express treasure box already in the road.

The intention and deliberation of the outrage was plain enough to Hale's 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 too.

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 echo 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 once more 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 passenger who had given up the greenbacks drew, with a slow, irritating tolerance, "I reckon 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—maybe you know more about it than us. As to the robbin'—ez far as I kin remember, you haven't unloaded much. Ef you're talkin' about what oughter've been done, I'll tell you what could have happened. F'raps ye noticed that when he pulled up I made a kind of grab for my weppin' 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, "he'd have hesitated."

"He'd hev blown you with both barrels outer 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 yet left enough to have gone round, promiss-kiss, 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 reckon you know what a duel is?"

"Yes."

"Well, the chances agin us was about the same as you'd have ef 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'raps 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 conscious of the ludicrous insufficiency of his own grievance 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 ez well as they know how to get at you. This yer coach is bound to go regular, and on certain days. They ain't. By the time the sheriff gets out his posse they've skeddaddled, and the leader, like as not, is takin' his quiet cocktail at the Bank Exchange, or maybe 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 fly.' It may be a part of Joaquin Mdrrieta's band, though I wouldn't swear to it."

"The leader might have been Gentleman George, from up country," interposed a passenger. "He seemed to know in a few fancy words, particularly in that 'Good night' "

Sorter chuckled a little sentiment in it. Didn't seem to be the same thing ez 'Git, yer d—d suckers,' on the other line."

"Whoever he was he knew the road and the men who traveled on it. Like ez not he went over the line beside the driver on the box 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 love of law and order; the kind of man who is the first to take that law and order into his own hands when he does not find it existing to 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 those 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 else'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, meeting Hale's clear glance, but rather as if yielding to a careless reflection:

"It might be done with four men. We 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 men, after awkwardly and perfunctorily grasping each other's hand, 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 undesignated 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 undesignated 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 himself 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 embarrassment.

"Ye had a mighty narrer escape down there jist 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 ez good as allowed he hadn't any grik."

"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 hes let daylight through a dozen chaps afore now for half what you said."

"Indeed?"

"Howsumever," 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 bet. Ef, ez I suspect, the leader is an airy young feller from Frisco, who hes took to the road lately, Clinch hes got a personal grudge agin him from a quarrel over draw poker."

This was the last blow to Hale's ideal crusade. Here he was—an honest, respectable citizen—engaged as simple accessory to a lawless vendetta originating at a gambling table! When the first shock was over that grim philosophy which is the reaction of all imaginative 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 Rawlins more coolly.

"Then you suspect who is the leader?"

"Only on ginral principles. There was a finer touch, so to speak, in this yer robbery 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 that at the station hotels, when the coaches came in, the folks used to stand round with blankets to wrap up the passengers ez ez not to sker the wimen. That's a story that the driver and express manager drove up oneday with only a copy of The Altj 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 Altj."

"Time's up."

"Are you ready, gentlemen?" said Col. Clinch.

Hale started. He had forgotten his wife and family at Eagle's Court, ten miles away. They would be alarmed at his absence, would perhaps hear some exaggerated version of the stage coach robbery and fear the worst.

"Is there any way I could send a line to Eagle's Court before daybreak?" he asked eagerly.

The station was already drained of its spare men and horses. The undesignated passenger stepped forward and offered to take it himself when his business, which he would dispatch as quickly as possible, was concluded.

"That ain't a bad idea," said Clinch, reflectively, "for ef yer hurry you'll head 'em off in caso 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, and one man's as good as a dozen."

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



And took his place in the cavalcade.

They had ridden in silence for nearly an hour, and had passed the scene of the robbery by a higher track. Morning had long ago advanced its colors on the cold white peaks to their right, and was taking possession of the spur where they rode.

"It looks like snow," said Rawlins quietly.

Hale turned toward him in astonishment. Nothing on earth or sky looked less likely. It had been cold, but that might have been only a current from the frozen peaks beyond, reaching the lower valley. The ridge on which they had halted was still thick with yellowish-green summer foliage, mingled with the darker evergreen of pine and fir. Oven-like canyons in the long flanks of the mountain seemed still to glow with the heat of yesterday's noon; the breathless air yet trembled and quivered over stifling gorges and passes in the granite rocks, while far at their feet sixty miles of perpetual summer stretched away over the winding American river, now and then lost in a gossamer haze. It was scarcely ripe October where they stood; they could see the plenitude of August still lingering in the valleys.

"I've seen Thomson's pass choked up with fifteen feet o' snow earlier than this," said Rawlins, answering Hale's gaze; "and last September the passengers sledged over the road we came last night, and all the time Thomson, a mile lower down over the ridge in the hollow, smoking his pipe under roses in his piazzi! Mountains is mighty uncertain; they make their own weather ez they want it. I reckon you ain't wintered here yet."

Hale was obliged to admit that he had only taken Eagle's Court in the early spring. "Oh, you're all right at Eagle's—when you're there! But it's like Thomson's—it's the gettin' there that's—Hullo! What's that?" A shot, distant but distinct, had rung through the keen air. It was followed by another so alike as to seem an echo.

"That's over you, on the North ridge," said the ostler, "about two miles as the crow flies and five by the trail. Somebody's shootin' 'em."

"Not with a shot gun," said Clinch, quickly wheeling his horse with a gesture that electrified them. "It's them, and they've doubled on us! To the North ridge, gentlemen, and ride all you know!"

It needed no second challenge to completely transform that quiet cavalcade. The wild, man-hunting instinct, inseparable to most humanity, rose at their leader's look and word. With an incoherent and unintelligible cry, giving voice to the chase like the commonest hound of their fields, the order loving Hale and the philosophical Rawlins wheeled with the others, and in another instant the little band swept out of sight in the forest.

An immense and immeasurable quiet succeeded. The sunlight glistened silently on cliff and scar, the vast distance below seemed to stretch 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.

## CHAPTER II

Eagle's Court, one of the highest canyons of the Sierras, was in reality a plateau of tableland, embayed like a green lake in a semi-circular sweep of granite, that, lifting itself 3,000 feet higher, became a foundation for the eternal snows. The mountain geni of space and atmosphere jealously guarded its seclusion and surrounded it with illusions; it never looked to be exactly what it was; the traveler who saw it from the North ridge apparently at his feet in descending found himself separated from it by a mile long abyss and a rushing river; those who sought it by a seeming direct trail at the end of an hour lost sight of it completely, or, abandoning the quest and retracing their steps, suddenly came upon the gap through which it was entered. That which from the ridge appeared to be a copse of bushes beside the tiny dwelling were trees 300 feet high; the cultivated lawn before it, which might have been covered by the traveler's handkerchief, was a field of 1,000 acres.

The house itself was a long, low, irregular structure, chiefly of roof and veranda, picturesquely upheld by rustic pillars of pine, with the bark still adhering, and covered with vines and trailing roses. Yet it was evident that the coolness produced by this vast extent of cover was more than the architect, who had planned it under the influence of a staring and bewildering sky, had trustfully conceived, for it had to be mitigated by blazing fires in open hearths when the thermometer marked 100 degrees in the field beyond. The dry, restless wind that continually rocked the tall masts of the pines with a sound like the distant sea, while it stimulated outdoor physical exertion and defied fatigue, left the sedentary dwellers in these altitudes chilled in the shade they courted, or scorched them with heat when they ventured to bask supinely in the sun. White muslin curtains at the French windows, and rugs, skins and heavy furs dispersed in the interior, with certain other charming but incongruous details of furniture, marked the inconsistencies of the climate.

There was a coquettish indication of this in the costume of Miss Kate Scott as she stepped out on the veranda that morning. A man's broad-brimmed Panama hat, partly unsexed by a twisted, gayly colored scarf, but retaining enough character to give piquancy to the pretty curves of the face beneath, protected her from the sun; a red flannel shirt—another spoil from the enemy—and a thick jacket shielded her from the austerities of the morning breeze. But the next inconsistency was peculiarly her own. Miss Kate always wore the freshest and lightest of white cambric skirts, without the least reference to the temperature. To the practical sanatory remonstrances of her brother-in-law, and to the conventional criticism of her sister, she opposed the same defense: "How else is one to tell when it is summer in this ridiculous climate! And then, woolen is stuffy, color draws the sun, and one at least knows when one is clean or dirty." Artistically the result was far from unsatisfactory. It was a pretty figure under the somber pines, against the gray granite and the steely sky, and seemed to lend the yellowing fields from which the flowers had already fled a floral relief of color. I do not think the few masculine wayfarers of that locality objected to it; indeed, some had betrayed an indiscreet admiration, and had curiously followed the invitation of Miss Kate's warmly colored figure until they had encountered the invincible indifference of Miss Kate's cold gray eyes. With these manifestations her brother-in-law did not concern himself; he had perfect confidence in her unqualified disinterest in the neighboring humanity, and permitted her to wander in her solitary picturesqueness, or accompanied her when she rode in her dark green habit, with equal freedom from anxiety.

For Miss Scott, although only 20, had already subjected most of her maidenly illusions to mature critical analyses. She had voluntarily accompanied her sister and mother to California, in the earnest hope that nature contained something worth saying to her, and was disappointed to find she had already discounted its value in the pages of books. She hoped to find a vague freedom in this unconventional life thus opened to her, or rather to show others that she knew how intelligently to appreciate it, but as yet she was only able to express it in the one detail of dress already alluded to. Some of the men, and nearly all of the women, she had met thus far, she was amazed to find, valued the conventionalities she believed she despised, and were voluntarily assuming the chains she thought she had thrown off. Instead of learning anything from them, these children of nature had bored her with eager questionings regarding the civilization she had abandoned, or irritated her with crude imitations of it for her benefit. "Fancy,"

[To be continued.]