

# SNOW BOUND AT EAGLE'S

BY BRET HARTE

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She had written to a friend in Boston, "my calling on Sue Murphy, who remembered the Donner tragedy, and who once shot a grizzly that was prowling round her cabin, and think of her begging me to lend her my sack for a pattern, and wanting to know if 'polonays' were still worn." She remembered more bitterly the romance that had tickled her earlier fancy, told of two college friends of her brother-in-law's who were living the "perfect life" in the mines, laboring in the ditches with a copy of Homer in their pockets, and writing letters of the purest philosophy under the free air of the pines. How, coming unexpectedly on them in their Arcadia, the party found them unrepresentable through dirt, and thenceforth unknowable through domestic complications that had filled their Arcadian cabin with half-bred children.

Much of this disillusion she had kept within her own heart, from a feeling of pride, or only lightly touched upon it in her relations with her mother and sister. For Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Scott had no idols to shatter, no enthusiasms to subdue. Firmly and unalterably conscious of their own superiority to the life they led and the community that surrounded them, they accepted their duties cheerfully, and performed them conscientiously. Those duties were loyalty to Hale's interests and a vague missionary work among the neighbors, which, like most missionary work, consisted rather in making their own ideas understood than in understanding the ideas of their audience. Old Mrs. Scott's zeal was partly religious, an inheritance from her Puritan ancestry; Mrs. Hale's was the affability of a gentle woman and the obligation of her position. To this was added the slight languor of the cultivated American wife, whose health has been affected by the birth of her first child, and whose views of marriage and maternity were slightly tinged with gentle scepticism. She was sincerely attached to her husband, "who dominated the household," like the rest of his "women folk," with the faint consciousness of that division of service which renders the position of the sultan of a seraglio at once so prominent and so precarious. The attitude of John Hale in his family circle was dominant because it had never been subjected to criticism or comparison; and perilous for the same reason.

Mrs. Hale presently joined her sister on the veranda, and, shading her eyes with a narrow white hand, glanced on the prospect with a polite interest and ladylike urbanity. The searching sun, which, as Miss Kate once intimated, was "vulgarity itself," stared at her in return, but could not call a blush to her somewhat sallow cheek. Neither could it detract, however, from the delicate prettiness of her refined face, with its soft gray shadows, or the dark, gentle eyes, whose blue-veined lids were just then wrinkled into coquettishly mischievous lines by the strong light. She was taller and thinner than Kate, and had at times a certain shy, coy sinuosity of movement which gave her a more virginal suggestion than her unmarried sister. For Miss Kate, from her earliest youth, had been distinguished by that matronly sedateness of voice and step, and completeness of figure, which indicates some members of the gallinaceous tribe from their callow infancy.

"I suppose John must have stopped at the Summit on some business," said Mrs. Hale, "or he would have been here already. It's scarcely worth while waiting for him, unless you choose to ride over and meet him. You might change your dress," she continued, looking doubtfully at Kate's costume. "Put on your riding habit, and take Manuel with you."



"You might change your dress."

"And take the only man we have, and leave you alone?" returned Kate slowly. "No!"

"There are the Chinese field hands," said Mrs. Hale; "you must correct your ideas, and really allow them some humanity, Kate. John says they have a very good compulsory school system in their own country, and can read and write."

"That would be of little use to you here alone if—" Kate hesitated.

"If what?" said Mrs. Hale, smiling. "Are you thinking of Manuel's dreadful story of the grizzly tracks across the fields this morning? I promise you that neither I nor another, nor Minnie, shall stir out of the house until your return, if you wish it."

"I wasn't thinking of that," said Kate; "though I don't believe the beating of a gong and the using of strong language is the best way to frighten a grizzly from the house. Besides, the Chinese are going down the river

to-day to a funeral, or a wedding, or a feast of stolen chickens—they're all the same—and won't be here."

"Then take Manuel," repeated Mrs. Hale. "We have the Chinese servants and Indian Molly in the house to protect us from Heaven knows what! I have the greatest confidence in Chy-Lee as a warrior, and in Chinese warfare generally. One has only to hear him pipe in time of peace to imagine what a terror he might become in war time. Indeed, anything more deadly and soul-harrowing than that love song he sang for us last night I cannot conceive. But really, Kate, I am not afraid to stay alone. You know what John says: we ought to be always prepared for anything that might happen."

"My dear Josie," returned Kate, putting her arm around her sister's waist, "I am perfectly convinced that if Three-fingered Jack, or Two-toed Bill, or even Joaquin Murietta himself should step, red handed, on that veranda you would gently invite him to take a cup of tea, inquire about the state of the road, and refrain delicately from all allusions to the sheriff. But I sha'n't take Manuel from you. I really cannot undertake to look after his morals at the station, and keep him from drinking aguardiente with suspicious characters at the bar. It is true he 'kisses my hand' in his speech, even when it is thickest, and offers his back to me for a horse block, but I think I prefer the sober and honest familiarity of even that Pike county landlord who is satisfied to say, 'Jump, girl, and I'll fetch ye!'"

"I hope you didn't change your manner to either of them for that," said Mrs. Hale with a faint sigh. "John wants to be good friends with them, and they are behaving quite decently lately, considering that they can't speak a grammatical sentence nor know the use of a fork."

"And now the man puts on gloves and a tall hat to come here on Sundays, and the woman won't call until you've called first," retorted Kate; "perhaps you call that improvement. The fact is, Josephine," continued the young girl, folding her arms demurely, "we might as well admit it at once—these people don't like us."

"That's impossible!" said Mrs. Hale, with sublime simplicity. "You don't like them, you mean."

"I like them better than you do, Josie, and that's the reason why I feel it and you don't." She checked herself, and after a pause resumed in a lighter tone: "No; I sha'n't go to the station; I'll commune with nature to-day, and won't take any humanity in mine, thank you," as Bill the driver says. Adieu."

"I wish Kate would not use that dreadful slang, even in jest," said Mrs. Scott, in her rocking chair at the French window, when Josephine re-entered the parlor as her sister walked briskly away. "I am afraid she is being infected by the people at the station. She ought to have a change."

"I was just thinking," said Josephine, looking abstractedly at her mother, "that I would try to get John to take her to San Francisco this winter. The Careys are expected, you know; she might visit them."

"I'm afraid if she stays here much longer she won't care to see them at all. She seems to care for nothing now that she ever liked before," returned the old lady ominously.

Meantime the subject of these criticisms was carrying away her own reflections tightly buttoned up in her short jacket. She had driven back her dog Spot—another one of her disillusionous, who, giving way to his lower nature, had once killed a sheep—as she did not wish her Jacques-like contemplation of any wounded deer to be inconsistently interrupted by a fresh outrage from her companion. The air was really very chilly, and for the first time in her mountain experience the direct rays of the sun seemed to be worn of their power. This compelled her to walk more briskly than she was conscious of, for in less than an hour she came suddenly and breathlessly upon the mouth of the canyon or natural gateway to Eagle's Court.

To her always a profound spectacle of mountain magnificence, it seemed to-day almost terrible in its cold, strong grandeur. The narrowing pass was choked for a moment between two gigantic buttresses of granite, approaching each other so closely at their towering summits that trees growing in opposite clefts of the rocks intermingled their branches and pointed the soaring Gothic arch of a stupendous gateway. She raised her eyes with a quickly beating heart. She knew that the interlacing trees above her were as large as those she had just quitted; she knew also that the point where they met was only half way up the cliff, for she had once gazed down upon them, dwindled to shrubs from the airy summit; she knew that their shaken comes fell a thousand feet perpendicularly, or bounded like shot from the scarred walls they bombarded. She remembered that one of these pines, dislodged from its high foundations, had once dropped like a portcullis in the archway, blocking the pass, and was only carried afterward by assault of steel and fire. Bending her head mechanically, she ran swiftly through the shadowy passage, and halted only at the beginning of the ascent on the other side.

It was here that the actual position of the plateau, so indefinite of approach, began to be realized. It now appeared an independent elevation, surrounded on three sides by gorges and water courses, so narrow as to be overlooked from the principal mountain range, with which it was connected by a long canyon that led to the ridge. At the outlet of this canyon—in bygone ages a mighty river—it had the appearance of having been slowly raised by the diluvium of that river, and the debris washed down from above—a suggestion repeated in miniature by the artificial plateaus of excavated soil raised before the mouth of mining tunnels in the lower flanks of the mountain. It was the realization of a fact—often forgotten by the dwellers in Eagle's Court—that the valley below them, which was their connecting link with the surrounding world, was only reached by ascending the mountain, and the nearest road was over the higher mountain ridge. Now

before had that impressed itself so strongly upon the young girl as when she turned that morning to look upon the plateau below her. It seemed to illustrate the conviction that had been slowly shaping itself out of her reflections on the conversation of that morning. It was possible that the perfect understanding of a higher life was only reached from a height still greater, and that to those half way up the mountain the summit was never as truthfully revealed as to the humbler dwellers in the valley.

I do not know that these profound truths prevented her from gathering some quaint ferns and berries, or from keeping her calm gray eyes open to certain practical changes that were taking place around her. She had noticed a singular thickening in the atmosphere that seemed to prevent the passage of the sun's rays, yet without diminishing the transparent quality of the air. The distant snow peaks were as plainly seen, though they appeared as if in moonlight. This seemed due to no cloud or mist, but rather to a falling of the sun itself. The occasional flurry of wings overhead, the whirling of larger birds in the cover, and a frequent rustling in the undergrowth, as of the passage of some stealthy animal, began equally to attract her attention. It was so different from the habitual silence of these sedate solitudes. Kate had no vague fear of wild beasts; she had been long enough a mountaineer to understand the general immunity enjoyed by the unmolested wayfarer, and kept her way undismayed. She was descending an abrupt trail when she was stopped by a sudden crash in the bushes. It seemed to come from the opposite incline, directly in a line with her, and apparently on the very trail that she was pursuing. The crash was then repeated again and again lower down, as of a descending body. Expecting the apparition of some fallen tree, or detached bowlder bursting through the thicket, in its way to the bottom of the gulch, she waited. The foliage was suddenly brushed aside, and a large grizzly bear half rolled, half waddled, into the trail on the opposite side of the hill. A few moments more would have brought them face to face at the foot of the gulch; when she stopped there were not fifty yards between them.

She did not scream; she did not faint; she was not even frightened. There did not seem to be anything terrifying in this huge, stupid beast, who, arrested by the rustle of a stone displaced by her descending feet, rose slowly on his haunches and gazed at her with small, wondering eyes. Nor did it seem strange to her, seeing that he was in her way, to pick up a stone, throw it in his direction and say simply, "Sho! get away!" as she would have done to an intruding cow. Nor did it seem odd that he should actually "go away" as he did, scrambling back into the bushes again and disappearing like some grotesque figure in a transformation scene. It was not until after he had gone that she was taken with a slight nervousness and giddiness, and retraced her steps somewhat hurriedly, slaying a little at every rustle in the thicket. By the time she had reached the great gateway she was doubtful whether to be pleased or frightened at the incident, but she concluded to keep it to herself.

It was still intensely cold. The light of the midday sun had decreased still more, and on reaching the plateau again she saw that a dark cloud, not unlike the precursor of a thunder storm, was brooding over the snowy peaks beyond. In spite of the cold this singular suggestion of summer phenomena was still borne out by the distant smiling valley, and even in the soft grasses at her feet. It seemed to her the crowning inconsistency of the climate, and with a half serious, half playful protest on her lips she hurried forward to seek the shelter of the house.

## CHAPTER III.

To Kate's surprise the lower part of the house was deserted, but there was an unusual activity on the floor above, and the sound of heavy steps. There were alien marks of dusty feet on the scrupulously clean passage, and on the first step of the stairs a spot of blood. With a sudden genuine alarm that drove her previous adventure from her mind, she impatiently called her sister's name. There was a hasty yet subdued rustle of skirts on the staircase, and Mrs. Hale, with her finger on her lip, swept Kate unceremoniously into the sitting room, closed the door and leaned back against it, with a faint smile. She had a crumpled paper in her hand.

"Don't be alarmed, but read that first," she said, handing her sister the paper. "It was brought just now."

Kate instantly recognized her brother's distinct hand. She read hurriedly. "The coach was robbed last night; nobody hurt. I've lost nothing but a day's time, as this business will keep me here until to-morrow, when Manuel can join me with a fresh horse. No cause for alarm. As the bearer goes out of his way to bring you this, see that he wants for nothing."

"Well!" said Kate, expectantly.

"Well, the 'bearer' was fired upon by the robbers, who were lurking on the ridge. He was wounded in the leg. Luckily he was picked up by his friend, who was coming to meet him, and brought here as the nearest place. He's upstairs in the spare bed in the spare room, with his friend, who won't leave his side. He won't even have mother in the room. They've stopped the bleeding with John's ambulance things, and now, Kate, here's a chance for you to show the value of your education in the ambulance class. The ball has got to be extracted. Here's your opportunity."

Kate looked at her sister curiously. There was a faint pink flush on her pale cheeks, and her eyes were gently sparkling. She had never seen her look so pretty before.

"Why not have sent Manuel for a doctor at once?" asked Kate.

"The nearest doctor is fifteen miles away, and Manuel is nowhere to be found. Perhaps he's gone to look after the stock. There's some talk of snow; imagine the absurdity

of it!"

"But who are they?"

"They speak of themselves as 'friends,' as if it were a profession. The wounded one was a passenger, I suppose."

"But what are they like?" continued Kate. "I suppose they're like them all."

Mrs. Hale shrugged her shoulders.

"The wounded one, when he's not fainting away, is laughing. The other is a creature with a mustache, and gloomy beyond expression."

"What are you going to do with them?" said Kate.

"What should I do? Even without John's letter I could not refuse the shelter of my house to a wounded and helpless man. I shall keep him, of course, until John comes. Why, Kate, I really believe you are so prejudiced against these people you'd like to turn them out. But I forget! It's because you like them so well. Well, you need not fear to expose yourself to the fascinations of the wounded Christy Minstrel—I'm sure he's that—or to the unspeakable one, who is shyness itself, and would not dare to raise his eyes to you."

There was a timid, hesitating step in the passage. It paused before the door, moved away, returned, and finally asserted its intentions in the gentlest of taps.

"It's him; I'm sure of it," said Mrs. Hale, with a suppressed smile.

Kate threw open the door smartly, to the extreme discomfiture of a tall, dark figure that already had slunk away from it. For all that he was a good looking enough fellow, with a mustache as long and almost as flexible as a ringlet. Kate could not help noticing also that his hand, which was nervously pulling the mustache, was white and thin.

"Excuse me," he stammered, without raising his eyes, "I was looking for—for—the old lady. I—I beg your pardon. I didn't know that you—the young ladies—company—were here. I intended—I only wanted to say that my friend—" He stopped at the slight smile that passed quickly over Mrs. Hale's mouth and his pale face reddened with an angry flush.

"I hope he is not worse," said Mrs. Hale, with more than her usual languid gentleness. "My mother is not here at present. Can I—can we—this is my sister—do as well?"

Without looking up he made a constrained recognition of Kate's presence, that, embarrassed and curt as it was, had none of the awkwardness of rusticity.

"Thank you; you're very kind. But my friend is a little stronger, and if you can lend me an extra horse I'll try to get him on the Summit to-night."

"But you surely will not take him away from us so soon?" said Mrs. Hale, with a languid look of alarm, in which Kate, however, detected a certain real feeling. "Wait at least until my husband returns to-morrow."

"He won't be here to-morrow," said the stranger hastily. He stopped, and as quickly corrected himself. "That is, his business is so very uncertain, my friend says."

Only Kate noticed the slip; but she noticed also that her sister was apparently unconscious of it. "You think," she said, "that Mr. Hale may be delayed?"

He turned upon her almost brusquely. "I mean that it is already snowing up there," he pointed through the window to the cloud Kate had noticed; "if it comes down lower in the pass the roads will be blocked up. That is why it would be better for us to try and get on at once."

"But if Mr. Hale is likely to be stopped by snow so are you," said Mrs. Hale playfully; "and you had better let us try to make your friend comfortable here rather than expose him to that uncertainty in his weak condition. We will do our best for him. My sister is dying for an opportunity to show her skill in surgery," she continued, with an unexpected mischievousness that only added to Kate's surprised embarrassment. "Aren't you, Kate?"

Equivocal as the young girl knew her silence appeared, she was unable to utter the simplest polite evasion. Some unaccountable impulse kept her constrained and speechless. The stranger did not, however, wait for her reply, but, casting a swift, hurried glance around the room, said, "It's impossible; we must go. In fact, I've already taken the liberty to order the horses round. They are at the door now. You may be certain," he added with quick earnestness, suddenly lifting his dark eyes to Mrs. Hale, and as rapidly withdrawing them, "that your horse will be returned at once, and—and—we won't forget your kindness." He stopped and turned toward the hall. "I—I have brought my friend down stairs. He wants to thank you before he goes."

As he remained standing in the hall the two women stepped to the door. To their surprise, half reclining on a cane sofa, was the wounded man, and what could be seen of his slight figure was wrapped in a dark serape. His beardless face gave him a quaint boyishness quite inconsistent with the mature lines of his temples and forehead. Pale, and in pain as he evidently was, his blue eyes twinkled with intense amusement. Not only did his manner offer a marked contrast to the somber uneasiness of his companion, but he seemed to be the only one perfectly at his ease in the group around him.

"It's rather rough making you come out here to see me off," he said, with a not unmusical laugh that was very infectious, "but Ned there, who carried me downstairs, wanted to tote me round the house in his arms like a baby to say ta-ta to you all. Excuse my not rising, but I feel as uncertain below as a mermaid, and as out of my element," he added, with a mischievous glance at his friend. "Ned concluded I must go on. But I must say good-by to the old lady first. Ah! here she is."

To Kate's complete bewilderment not only did the utter familiarity of this speech pass unnoticed and unrebuked by her sister, but actually her own mother advanced quickly with every expression of lively sympathy,

and with the authority of her years and an almost maternal anxiety endeavored to dissuade the invalid from going. "This is not my horse," she said, looking at her daughter, "but if it were I should not hear of your leaving, not only to-night, but until you were out of danger. Josephine! Kate! What are you thinking of to permit it? Well, then, I forbid it—there!"

Had they become suddenly insane, or were they bowitched by this morose intruder and his insufferably familiar confidant? The man was wounded, it was true; they might have to put him up in common humanity; but here was her austere mother, who wouldn't come in the room when Whisky Dick called on business, actually pressing both of the invalid's hands, while her sister, who never extended a finger to the ordinary visiting humanity of the neighborhood, looked on with evident complacency.

The wounded man suddenly raised Mrs. Scott's hand to his lips, kissed it gently, and, with his smile quite vanished, endeavored to rise to his feet. "It's of no use—we must go. Give me your arm, Ned. Quick! Are the horses there?"

"Dear me," said Mrs. Scott quickly, "I forgot to say the horse cannot be found anywhere. Manuel must have taken him this morning; to look up the stock. But he will be back to-night certainly, and if to-morrow!"

The wounded man sank back to a sitting position. "Is Manuel your man?" he asked grimly.

"Yes."

The two men exchanged glances. "Marked on his left cheek and drinks a good deal?"

"Yes," said Kate, finding her voice. "Why?"

The amused look came back to the man's eyes. "That kind of man isn't safe to wait for. We must take our own horse, Ned. Are you ready?"

"Yes."

The wounded man again attempted to rise. He fell back, but this time quite heavily. He had fainted.

Involuntarily and simultaneously the three women rushed to his side. "He cannot go," said Kate, suddenly.



"You cannot go," said Kate, suddenly.

"He will be better in a moment." "But only for a moment. Will nothing induce you to change your mind?"

As if in reply a sudden gust of wind brought a volley of rain against the window.

"That will," said the stranger bitterly. "The rain!"

"A mile from here it is snow; and before we could reach the Summit with these horses the road would be impassable."

He made a slight gesture to himself, as if accepting an inevitable defeat, and turned to his companion, who was slowly reviving under the active ministrations of the two women. The wounded man looked around with a weak smile. "This is one way of going off," he said faintly, "but I could do this sort of thing as well on the road."

"You can do nothing now," said his friend, decidedly. "Before we get to the Gate the road will be impassable for our horses."

"For any horses?" asked Kate.

"For any horses. For any man or beast, I might say. Where we cannot get out no one can get in," he added, as if answering her thoughts. "I am afraid that you won't see your brother to-morrow morning. But I'll reconnoiter, as I can do so without torturing him," he said, looking anxiously at the helpless man; "he's got about his share of pain, I reckon, and the first thing is to get him easier." It was the longest speech he had made to her; it was the first time he had fairly looked her in the face. His shy restlessness had suddenly given way to dogged resignation, less abstracted, but scarcely more flattering to his entertainers. Lifting his companion gently in his arms, as if he had been a child, he reascended the staircase, Mrs. Scott and the hastily summoned Molly following with overflowing solicitude. As soon as they were alone in the parlor Mrs. Hale turned to her sister: "Only that our guests seemed to be as anxious to go now as you were to pack them off I should have been shocked at your inhospitality. What has come over you, Kate? These are the very people you have reproached me so often with not being civil enough to."

"But who are they?"

"How do I know? There is your brother's letter."

She usually spoke of her husband as "John." This slight shifting of relationship and responsibility to the feminine mind was significant. Kate was a little frightened and remorseful.

"I only meant you don't even know their names."

"That wasn't necessary for giving them a bed and bandages. Do you suppose the good Samaritan ever asked the wounded Jew's name, and that the Levite did not excuse himself because the thieves had taken the poor man's card case? Do the directions, 'In case of accident, in your ambulance rules, [To be continued.]'"