

# SNOW BOUND AT EAGLE'S

BY BRET HARTE

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road: "First lay the sufferer on his back and inquire his name and family connections! Besides, you can call one 'Ned' and the other 'George,' if you like."

"Oh, you know what I mean," said Kate, irreverently. "Which is George?"

"George is the wounded man," said Mrs. Hale; "not the one who talked to you more than he did to any one else. I suppose the poor man was frightened and read dismissal in your eyes."

"I wish John were here."  
"I don't think we have anything to fear in his absence from men whose only wish is to get away from us. If it is a question of propriety, my dear Kate, surely there is the presence of mother to prevent any scandal—although really her own conduct with the wounded one is not above suspicion," she added, with that novel mischievousness that seemed a return of her lost girlhood. "We must try to do the best we can with them and for them," she said decidedly, "and meantime I'll see if I can't arrange John's room for them."

"John's room?"  
"Oh, mother is perfectly satisfied; indeed, suggested it. It's larger and will hold two beds, for 'Ned,' the friend, must attend to him at night. And, Kate, don't you think you're not going out again, you might change your costume! It does very well while we are alone."

"Well," said Kate indignantly, "as I am not going into his room—"

"I'm not so sure about that, if we can't get a regular doctor. But he is very restless, and wanders all over the house like a timid and apologetic spaniel."

"Who?"  
"Why 'Ned.' But I must go and look after the patient. I suppose they've got him safe in his bed again," and with a nod to her sister she tripped up stairs.

Uncomfortable and embarrassed, she knew not why, Kate sought her mother. But that good lady was already in attendance on the patient, and Kate hurried past that baleful center of attraction with a feeling of loneliness and strangeness she had never experienced before. Entering her room she went to the window—she saw and cast refuge of the troubled mind—and gazed out. Turning her eyes in the direction of her morning's walk, she started back with a sense of being dazzled. She rubbed first her eyes and then the rain-dimmed pane. It was no illusion! The whole landscape, so familiar to her, was one vast field of dead, colorless white. Trees, rocks, even distance itself, had vanished in those few hours. An even, shadowless, motionless white sea filled the horizon. On either side a vast wall of snow seemed to shut out the world like a shroud. Only the green plateau before her, with its sloping meadows and fringes of pines and cottonwood, lay alone like a summer island in this frozen sea.

A sudden desire to view this phenomenon more closely, and to learn for herself the limits of this new tethered life, completely possessed her, and, accustomed to act upon her independent impulses, she seized a hooded waterproof cloak and slipped out of the house unperceived. The rain was falling steadily along the descending trail where she walked, but beyond, scarcely a mile across the chasm, the wintry distance began to confuse her brain with the inextricable swarming of snow. Hurrying down with feverish excitement, she at last came in sight of the arching granite portals of their domain. But her first glance through the gateway showed it closed as if with a white portcullis. Kate remembered that the trail began to ascend beyond the arch, and knew that what she saw was only the mountain side she had partly climbed this morning. But the snow had crept down its flank, and the exit by trail was practically closed. Breathlessly making her way back to the highest part of the plateau—the cliff behind the house that here descended abruptly to the rain-dimmed valley—she gazed at the dizzy depths in vain for some undiscovered or forgotten trail along its face. But a single glance convinced her of its inaccessibility. The gateway was indeed their only outlet to the plain below. She looked back at the falling snow beyond until she fancied she could see in the crossing and recrossing lines the moving meshes of a fateful web woven around them by viewless but inexorable fingers.

Half frightened, she was turning away, when she perceived, a few paces distant, the figure of the stranger, "Ned," also apparently absorbed in the gloomy prospect. He was wrapped in the clinging folds of a black serape braided with silver; the broad flap of a slouched hat beaten back by the wind exposed the dark, glistening curls on his white forehead. He was certainly very handsome and picturesque, and that apparently without effort or consciousness. Neither was there anything in his costume or appearance inconsistent with his surroundings, or even with what Kate could judge were his habits or position. Never less, she instantly decided that he was too handsome and too picturesque, without suspecting that her ideas of the limits of masculine beauty were merely personal experience.

As he turned away from the cliff they were brought face to face. "It doesn't look very encouraging over there," he said, quietly, as if the inevitableness of the situation had relieved him of his previous shyness and effort; "it's even worse than I expected. The snow must have begun to fall last night, and it looks as if it meant to stay. He stopped for a moment, and then, looking at her, said: "I suppose you know what this means?" "I don't understand it," she said. "I thought not. Well, that you

are absolutely cut off here from any communication or intercourse with any one outside of that canyon. By this time the snow is five feet deep over the only trail by which one can pass in and out of that gateway. I am not alarming you, I hope, for there is no real physical danger; a place like this ought to be well garrisoned, and certainly is self-supporting so far as the mere necessities and even comforts are concerned. You have wood, water, cattle and game at your command, but for two weeks at least you are completely isolated."

"For two weeks," said Kate, growing pale—"and my brother?"

"He knows all by this time and is probably as assured as I am of the safety of his family."

"For two weeks," continued Kate, "impossible! You don't know my brother! He will find some way to get to us."

"I hope so," returned the stranger, gravely, "for what is possible for him is possible for us."

"Then you are anxious to get away," Kate could not help saying.

"Very."

The reply was not discourteous in manner, but was so far from gallant that Kate felt a new and inconsistent resentment. Before she could say anything he added, "And I hope you will remember, whatever may happen, that I did my best to avoid staying here longer than was necessary to keep my friend from bleeding to death in the road."

"Certainly," said Kate; then added awkwardly, "I hope he'll be better soon." She was silent, and then, quickening her pace, said hurriedly, "I must tell my sister this dreadful news."

"I think she is prepared for it. If there is anything I can do to help you I hope you will let me know. Perhaps I may be of some service. I shall begin by exploring the trails to-morrow, for the best service we can do you possibly is to take ourselves off; but I can carry a gun, and the woods are full of game driven down from the mountains. Let me show you something you may not have noticed." He stopped and pointed to a small knoll of sheltered shrubbery and granite on the opposite mountain, which still remained black against the surrounding snow. It seemed to be thickly covered with moving objects. "They are wild animals driven out of the snow," said the stranger. "That larger one is a grizzly; there is a panther, wolves, wildcats, a fox, and some mountain goats."

"An ill-assorted party," said the young girl. "Ill luck makes them companions. They are too frightened to hurt one another now."

"But they will eat each other later on," said Kate, stealing a glance at her companion.

He tilted his long lashes and met her eyes. "Not on a heaven of refuge."

## CHAPTER IV.

Kate found her sister, as the stranger had intimated, fully prepared. A hasty inventory of provisions and means of subsistence showed that they had ample resources for a much longer isolation.

"They tell me it is by no means an uncommon case, Kate; somebody over at somebody's place was snowed in for four weeks, and now it appears that even the Summit house is not always accessible. John ought to have known it when he bought the place; in fact, I was ashamed to admit that he did not. But that is like John to prefer his own theories to the experience of others. However, I don't suppose we should even notice the privation except for the mails. It will be a lesson to John, though. As Mr. Lee says, he is on the outside, and can probably go wherever he likes from the Summit except to come here."

"Mr. Lee?" echoed Kate.  
"Yes, the wounded one; and the other's name is Falkner. I asked them in order that you might be properly introduced. There were very respectable Falkners in Charlestown, you remember; I thought you might want to know the name and perhaps trace the connection now that you are such good friends. It's providential they are here, as we haven't got a horse or a man in the place since Manuel disappeared, though Mr. Falkner says he can't be far away, or they would have met him on the trail if he had gone toward the summit."

"Did they say anything more of Manuel?"  
"Nothing; though I am inclined to agree with you that he isn't trustworthy. But that again is the result of John's idea of employing native skill at the expense of retaining native habits."

The evening closed early, and with no diminution in the falling rain and rising wind. Falkner kept his word, and unostentatiously performed the outdoor work in the barn and stables, assisted by the only Chinese servant remaining, and under the advice and supervision of Kate. Although he seemed to understand horses, she was surprised to find that he betrayed a civic ignorance of the ordinary details of the farm and rustic household. It was quite impossible that she should retain her distrustful attitude or his reserve in their enforced companionship. They talked freely of subjects suggested by the situation, Falkner exhibiting a general knowledge and intuition of things without parade or dogmatism. Doubtful of all versatility as Kate was, she could not help admitting to herself that his truths were none the less true for their quantity or that he got at them without ostentatious processes. His talk certainly was more picturesque than her brother's and less subsiding to her faculties. John had always crushed her.

When they returned to the house he did not linger in the parlor or sitting room, but at once rejoined his friend. When dinner was ready in the dining room, a little more deliberately arranged and ornamented than usual, the two women were somewhat surprised to receive an excuse from Falkner, begging them to allow him for the present to take his meals with the patient and thus save the necessity of another attendant.

"It is all shyness," said Mrs. Hale,

confidently, "and must not be permitted for a moment."

"I'm sure I should be quite willing to stay with the poor boy myself," said Mrs. Scott, simply, "and take Mr. Falkner's place while he dines."

"You are too willing, mother," said Mrs. Hale pertly, "and your 'poor boy,' as you call him, will never see 35 again."

"He will never see any other birthday," retorted her mother, "unless you keep him more quiet. He only talks when you're in the room."

"To want some relief to his friend's long face and mustaches that make him look prematurely in mourning," said Mrs. Hale, with a slight increase of animation. "I don't propose to leave them too much together. After dinner we'll adjourn to their room and lighten it up a little. You must come, Kate, to look at the patient and counteract the baleful effects of my frivolity."

Mrs. Hale's instincts were truer than her mother's experience; not only that the wounded man's eyes became brighter under the provocation of her presence, but it was evident that his naturally exuberant spirits were a part of his vital strength, and were absolutely essential to his quick recovery. Encouraged by Falkner's grave and practical assistance, which she could not ignore, Kate ventured to make an examination of Lee's wound. Even to her unpracticed eye it was less serious than at first appeared. The great loss of blood had been due to the laceration of certain small vessels below the knee, but neither artery nor bone was injured. A recurrence of the hemorrhage or fever was the only thing to be feared, and these could be averted by bandaging, repose and simple nursing.

The unflagging good humor of the patient under this manipulation, the quaint originality of his speech, the freedom of his fancy, which was, however, always controlled by a certain instinctive tact, began to affect Kate nearly as it had the others. She found herself laughing over the work she had undertaken in a pure sense of duty; she joined in the hilarity produced by Lee's affected terror of her surgical mania, and offered to undo the bandages in search of the thimble he declared she had left in the wound with a view to further experiments.

"You ought to broaden your practice," he suggested. "A good deal might be made out of Ned and a piece of soap left carelessly on the first step of the staircase, while mountains of surgical opportunities lie in a humble orange peel judiciously exposed. Only I



"You ought to broaden your practice."

warn you that you wouldn't find him as docile as I am. Decayed into a snowdrift and frozen, you might get some valuable experience in resuscitation by thawing him."

"I fancied you had done that already, Kate," whispered Mrs. Hale.

"Freezing is the new suggestion for painless surgery," said Lee, coming to Kate's relief with ready tact, "only the knowledge should be more generally spread. There was a man up at Strawberry fell under a sledge load of wood in the snow. Stunned by the shock, he was slowly freezing to death when, with a tremendous effort, he succeeded in freeing himself all but his right leg, pinned down by a small log. His ax happened to have fallen within reach, and a few blows on the log freed him."

"And saved the poor fellow's life," said Mrs. Scott, who was listening with sympathizing intensity.

"At the expense of his left leg, which he had unknowingly cut off under the pleasing supposition that it was a log," returned Lee, demurely.

Nevertheless, in a few moments he managed to divert the slightly shocked susceptibilities of the old lady with some rally of himself, and did not again interrupt the even, good humored communion of the party. The rain beating against the windows and the fire sparkling on the hearth seemed to lend a charm to their peculiar isolation, and it was not until Mrs. Scott rose with a warning that they were trespassing upon the rest of their patient that they discovered that the evening had slipped by unnoticed. When the door at last closed on the bright, sympathetic eyes of the two young women and the motherly benediction of the elder, Falkner walked to the window, and remained silent, looking into the darkness. Suddenly he turned bitterly to his companion.

"This is just hell, George."

George Lee, with a smile still on his boyish face, lazily moved his head.

"I don't know! If it wasn't for the old woman, who is the one solid chunk of absolute goodness here, expecting nothing, wanting nothing, it would be good fun enough! These two women, cooped up in this house, wanted excitement. They've got it! That man Hale wanted to show off by going for us; he had his chance, and will have it again before I've done with him. That d—d fool of a messenger wanted to go out of his way to exchange shots with me; I reckon he's the most satisfied of the lot! I don't know why you should growl. You did your level best to get away from here, and the result is that little ruffian is ready to worship you!"

"Yes—but this playing it on them—George

—this—  
"Who's playing it? Not you; I see you've given away our names already."

"I couldn't lie, and they know nothing by that."

"Do you think they would be happier by knowing it? Do you think that soft little creature would be as happy as she was tonight if she knew that her husband had been indirectly the means of laying me by the heels here? Where is the swindle! This hole in my leg! If you had been five minutes under that girl's d—d sympathetic fingers you'd have thought it was genuine. Is it in our trying to get away? Do you call that ten feet drift in the pass a swindle? Is it in the chance of Hale getting back while we're here? That's real enough, isn't it? I say, Ned, did you ever give your unfettered intellect to the contemplation of that?"

Falkner did not reply. There was an interval of silence, but he could see from the movement of George's shoulders that he was shaking with suppressed laughter.

"Fancy Mrs. Hale archly introducing her husband! My offering him a chair, but being all the time obliged to cover him with a derrick under the bedclothes. Your rushing in from your peaceful pastoral pursuits in the barn, with a pitchfork in one hand and the girl in the other, and dear old mammy sympathizing all round and trying to make everything comfortable."

"I should not be alive to see it, George," said Falkner, gloomily.

"You'd manage to pitchfork me and those two women on Hale's horse and ride away; that's what you'd do, or I don't know you! Look here, Ned," he added, more seriously, "the only swindling was our bringing that note here. That was your idea. You thought I would remove suspicion, and as you believed I was bleeding to death you played that game for all it was worth to save me. You might have done what I asked you to do—dropped me up in the bushes and got away yourself. I was good for a couple of shot yet and after that—what mattered! That night, the next day, the next time I take the road, or a year hence! It will come when it will come, all the same!"

He did not speak bitterly, nor relax his smile. Falkner, without speaking, slid his hand along the coverlet. Lee grasped it, and their hands remained clasped together for a few moments in silence.

"How is this to end? We cannot go on here in this way," said Falkner suddenly.

"If we cannot get away it must go on. Look here, Ned, I don't reckon to take anything out of this house that I didn't bring in it, or isn't freely offered to me; yet I don't, otherwise, you understand, intend making myself out a d—d bit better than I am. That's the only excuse I have for not making myself out just what I am. I don't know the fellow who's obliged to tell every one the last company he was in or the last thing he did! Do you suppose even these pretty little women tell us their whole story? Do you fancy that this St. John in the wilderness is canonized in his family? Perhaps, when I take the liberty to intrude in his affairs, as he has in mine, he'd see he isn't. I don't blame you for being sensitive, Ned. It's natural. When a man lives outside the revised statutes of his own state he is apt to be awfully fine on points of etiquette in his own household. As for me, I find it rather comfortable here. The beds of other people's making strike me as being more satisfactory than my own. Good night."

In a few moments he was sleeping the peaceful sleep of that youth which seemed to be his own dominant quality. Falkner stood for a little space and watched him, following the boyish lines of his cheek on the pillow, from the shadow of the light brown lashes under his closed lids to the lifting of his short upper lip over his white teeth with his regular respiration. Only a sharp accenting of the line of nostril and jaw and a faint depression of the temple betrayed his already tried manhood.

The house had long sunk to repose when Falkner returned to the window, and remained looking out upon the storm. Suddenly he extinguished the light, and passing quickly to the bed laid his hand upon the sleeper. Lee opened his eyes instantly.

"Are you awake?"

"Perfectly."

"Somebody is trying to get into the house!"

"Not him, eh?" said Lee gayly.

"No; two men. Mexicans, I think. One looks like Manuel."

"Ah," said Lee, drawing himself up to a sitting posture.

"Well?"

"Don't you see? He believes the women are alone."

"The dog—d—d hound!"

"Speak respectfully of one of my people, if you please, and hand me my furringer. Light the candle again and open the door. Let them get in quietly. They'll come here first. It's his room, you understand, and if there's any money it's here. Any way, they must pass here to get to the women's rooms. Leave Manuel to me and you take care of the other."

"I see."

"Manuel knows the house and will come first. When he's fairly in the room shut the door and go for the other. But no noise. This is just one of the sw-estest things out—if it's done properly."

"But you, George?"

"If I couldn't manage that fellow without turning down the bedclothes I'd kick myself. Hush. Steady now."

He lay down and shut his eyes as if in natural repose. Only his right hand, carefully placed under his pillow, closed on the handle of his pistol. Falkner quietly slipped into the passage. The light of the candle faintly illuminated the floor and opposite wall, but left it on either side in pitchy obscurity.

For some moments the silence was broken only by the sound of the rain without. The recurrent figure in bed seemed to have actually succumbed to sleep. The multitudinous small noises of a house in repose might

have been misinterpreted by ears less keen than the sleeper's; but when the apparent creaking of a far off shutter was followed by the sliding apparition of a dark head of tangled hair at the door Lee had not been deceived, and was prepared as if he had seen it. Another step and the figure entered the room. The door closed instantly behind it. The sound of a heavy body struggling against the partition outside followed, and then suddenly ceased.

The intruder turned and violently grasped the handle of the door, but recoiled at a quiet voice from the bed.

"Drop that, and come here."

He started back with an exclamation. The sleeper's eyes were wide open; the sleeper's extended arm and pistol covered him.

"Silence! or I'll let that candle shine through you."

"Yes, captain!" growled the astounded and frightened halfwitted. "I didn't know you were here."

Lee raised himself and grasped the long whip in his left hand and whirled it round his head.

"Will you dink up?"

The man sank back against the wall in silent terror.

"Open that door now—softly."

Manuel obeyed with trembling fingers.

"Ned," said Lee in a low voice, "bring him in here—quick."

There was a slight rustle, and Falkner appeared, backing in another gasping figure, whose eyes were starting under the strong grasp of the captor at his throat.

"Silence," said Lee, "all of you."

There was a breathless pause. The sound of a door hesitatingly opened in the passage broke the stillness, followed by the gentle voice of Mrs. Scott.

"Is anything the matter?"

Lee made a slight gesture of warning to Falkner, of inebriety to the others. "Everything's the matter," he called out cheerily. "Ned's managed to half pull down the house trying to get at something from my saddle bags."

"I hope he has not hurt himself," broke in another voice mischievously.

"Answer, you clumsy villain," whispered Lee, with twinkling eyes.

"I'm all right, thank you," responded Falkner with unaffected awkwardness.

There was a slight murmuring of voices, and then the door was heard to close. Lee turned to Falkner.

"Discern that bound and turn him loose outside, and make no noise. And you, Manuel, tell him what his face and your chances are if he shows his black face here again."

Manuel cast a single, terrified, supplicating glance, more suggestive than words, at his confederate, as Falkner shoved him before him from the room. The next moment they were silently descending the stairs.

"May I go too, captain?" entreated Manuel.

"I swear to God—"

"Shut the door!" The man obeyed.

"Now, then," said Lee, with a broad, gratified 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 discomfiture.

"See. You're bashful. Well, I'll help you along. Come! You know that I 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 reckon I had the right to a little fun on my own account, cap. I reckon ez 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 plottied."

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.