

SNOW BOUND AT RAGLES

BY HENRY HART

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and set up a company. Soon as he gets started, the first thing he does is to say that he wants \$300,000 o' money to make it pay and levies an assessment of \$200 a share. That's nothin' for them rich fellows to pay, or pretend to pay, but for boys on grub wages it meant only ruin. They couldn't pay, and had to forfeit their shares next to nothing. And Ned made one more desperate attempt to save them and himself by borrowing money on his shares; when that hound Harkins got wind of it, and let it be buzzed around that the ditch is a failure, and that he was goin' out of it; that brought the shares down to nothing. As Ned couldn't raise a dollar the new company swooped down on his shares for the debts they had got up, and left him and the boys to help themselves. Ned couldn't bear to face the boys that he'd helped to ruin and put out, and ain't been heard of since. After Harkins had got rid of Ned and the boys he managed to pay off that wonderful debt, and came out for \$100,000. That money—Ned's money—he sends to Sacramento, for he don't dare to travel with it himself, and is kalkilatin' to leave the kinty, for some of the boys sallow to kill him on sight. So ef you're wantin' to hunt suthin', that's yer chance, and you needn't go into the snow to do it."

"But surely the law can recover this money?" said Hale indignantly. "It is as infamous a robbery as"—He stopped as he caught Zenobia's eye.

"Ex last night's, you were goin' to say. I'll call it more. Them road agents don't pretend to be your friend—but take yer money and run their risks. For as to the law, that can't help yer."

"It's a skin game, and you might ez well expect to recover a gambling debt from a short card sharp," explained Clinch; "Falkner oughter shot him on sight."

"Or the boys lynched him," suggested Rawlins.

"I think," said Hale, more reflectively, "that in the absence of legal remedy a man of that kind should have been forced under strong physical menace to give up his ill-gotten gains. The money was the primary object, and if that could be got without bloodshed—which seems to me a useless crime—it would be quite as effective. Of course, if there was resistance or retaliation, it might be necessary to kill him."

He had unconsciously fallen into his old didactic and dogmatic habit of speech, and perhaps, under the spur of Zenobia's eyes, he had given it some natural emphasis. A dead silence followed, in which the others regarded him with amused and gratified surprise, and it was broken only by Zenobia rising and holding out her hand. "Shake!"

Hale raised it gallantly and pressed his lips on the one spotless finger.

"That's gospel truth. And you ain't the first white man to say it."

"Indeed," laughed Hale. "Who was the other?"

"George Loe!"

CHAPTER VI

The laughter that followed was interrupted by a sudden barking of the dogs in the outer clearing. Zenobia rose lazily and strode to the window. It relieved Hale of certain embarrassing reflections suggested by her comment.

"If it ain't that God-forsaken fool Dick bringing up passengers from the snow bound up stage in the road! I reckon I've got suthin' to say to that!" But the later appearance of the apologetic Dick, with the assurance that the party carried a permission from her father, granted at the lower station in view of such an emergency, checked her active opposition. "That's like paw," she soliloquized aggrievedly; "shuttin' us up and settin' the dogs on everybody for a week, and then lettin' the whole stage service pass through one door and out at another. Well, it's his house and his whisky, and they kin take it, but they don't get me to help 'em."

They certainly were not a prepossessing or good natured acquisition to the party. Apart from the natural antagonism which, on such occasions, those in possession always feel toward the new comer, they were strongly inclined to resist the dissatisfied querulousness and aggressive attitude of these fresh applicants for hospitality. The most offensive one was a person who appeared to exercise some authority over the others. He was loud, assuming and dressed with vulgar pretension. He quickly disposed himself in the chair vacated by Zenobia, and called for some liquor.

"I reckon you'll hev to help yourself," said Rawlins dryly, as the summons met with no response. "There are only two women in the house, and I reckon their hands are full already."

"I call it d-d uncivil treatment," said the man, raising his voice; "and Hennecker had better sing smaller if he don't want his old den pulled down some day. He ain't any better than men that hev been picked up afore now."

"You oughter told him that, and mebbe he'd hev come over with yer," returned Rawlins. "He's a mild, soft, easy going man, is Hennecker! Ain't he, Col. Clinch?"

The casual mention of Clinch's name produced the effect which the speaker probably intended. The stranger stared at Clinch, who, apparently oblivious of the conversation, was blinking his cold, gray eyes at the fire. Dropping his aggressive tone to mere querulousness, the man sought the whisky stand, and helped himself and his companions. Fortified by liquor he returned to

"I reckon you've heard about this yer robbery, Colonel," he said, addressing Zenobia, with an attempt at easy familiarity.

Without raising his eyes from the fire Clinch briefly assented, "I reckon."

"I'm up yer examining into it for the express."

"Lost much?" asked Rawlins.

"Nos so much as they might hev. That fool Harkins had \$100,000 in greenbacks sealed up like an ordinary package of \$1,000, and gave it to a friend, Bill Guthrie, in the bank to pick out some unlikely chap among the passengers to take charge of it to Reno. He wouldn't trust the express. Ha! ha!"

The dead, oppressive silence that followed his empty laughter made it seem almost artificial. Rawlins held his breath and looked at Clinch. Hale, with the instincts of a refined, sensitive man, turned hot with the embarrassment Clinch should have shown. For that gentleman, without lifting his eyes from the fire, and with no apparent change in his demeanor, lazily asked:

"Ye didn't ketch the name o' that passenger?"

"Naturally, no! For when Guthrie hears what was said agin him he wouldn't give his name until he heard from him."

"And what was said agin him?" asked Clinch musingly.

"What would be said agin a man that give up that sum o' money, like a chew of tobacco, for the asking? Why, there were but three men, as far as we kin hear, that did the job. And there were four passengers inside, armed, and the driver and express messenger on the box. Six were robbed by three—they were a sweet-scented lot! I reckon they must hev felt mighty small, for I hear they got up and skeddaddled from the station under the pretext of lookin' for the robbers." He laughed again, and the laugh was noisily repeated by his five companions at the other end of the room.

Hale, who had forgotten that the stranger was only echoing a part of his own criticism of eight hours before, was on the point of rising with burning cheeks and angry indignation, when the lazily uplifted eye of Clinch caught his, and absolutely held him down with its paralyzing and deadly significance. Murder itself seemed to look from those cruelly quiet and remorseless gray pupils. For a moment he forgot his own rage in this glimpse of Clinch's implacable resentment; for a moment, he felt a thrill of pity for the wretch who had provoked it. He remained motionless and fascinated in his chair as the lazy lids closed like a sheath over Clinch's eyes again. Rawlins, who had probably received the same glance of warning, remained equally still.

"They haven't heard the last of it yet, you bet," continued the infatuated stranger. "I've got a little statement here for the newspaper," he added, drawing some papers from his pocket; "suthin' I just run off in the coach as I came along. I reckon it'll show things up in a new light. It's time there should be some change. All the cussin' that's been usually done hev been by the passengers agin the express and stage company. I propose that the company should do a little cussin' themselves. See? P'raps you don't mind my readin' it to ye? It's just spicily enough to suit them newspaper chaps."

"Go on," said Col. Clinch quietly.

The man cleared his throat, with the preliminary pose of authorship, and his five friends, to whom the composition was evidently not unfamiliar, assumed anticipatory smiles.

"I call it 'Prize Pusillanimous Passengers.' Sort of runs easy off the tongue, you know."

"It now appears that the success of the late stage coach robbery near the summit was largely due to the pusillanimity—not to use a more serious word!"—He stopped and looked explanatorily toward Clinch: "Ye'll see in a minute what I'm gettin' at by that pusillanimity of the passengers themselves. 'It now transpires that there were only three robbers who attacked the coach, and that although passengers, drivers and express messenger were fully armed and were double the number of their assailants, not a shot was fired. We mean no reflections upon the well-known courage of Yuba Bill, nor the experience and coolness of Bracy Tibbetts, the courteous express messenger, both of whom have since confessed to have been more than astonished at the Christian and lamblike submission of the insiders. Amusing stories of some laughable yet sickening incidents of the occasion—such as grown men kneeling in the road and offering to strip themselves completely if their lives were only spared; of one of the passengers hiding under the seat, and only being dislodged by pulling his coat tails; of incredible sums promised, and even offers of menial service for the preservation of their wretched carcasses—are received with the greatest gusto; but we are in possession of facts which may lead to more serious accusations. Although one of the passengers is said to have lost a large sum of money intrusted to him, while attempting with barefaced effrontery to establish a rival 'carrying' business in one of the express company's own coaches—I call that a good point." He interrupted himself to allow the unrestrained applause of his own party. "Don't you?"

"It's just h-h-h," said Clinch, musingly.

"Yet the affair," resumed the stranger, from his manuscript, "is locked up in great and suspicious mystery. The presence of Jackson N. Stanner, esq. (that's his name), special detective agent to the company, and his staff in town, is a guaranty that the mystery will be thoroughly probed. Had to put that in to please the company," he again deprecatingly explained. "We are indebted to this gentleman for the facts."

"The plot you want to make in that article," said Clinch, rising, but still directing his face and his conversation to the fire, "is that I has set, as that no three men kin back down six unless they be cowards, or are willing to be backed down."

"That's the point what I start from," re-

joined Stanner, "and work up. I leave it to you ef it ain't so."

"I can't say as I agree with you," said the Colonel dryly. He turned, and still without lifting his eyes walked toward the door of the room which Zenobia had entered. The key was on the inside, but Clinch gently opened the door, removed the key, and closing the door again locked it from his side. Hale and Rawlins felt their hearts beat quickly; the others followed Clinch's slow movements and downcast mien with amused curiosity. After locking the other outlet from the room and putting the keys in his pocket, Clinch returned to the fire. For the first time he lifted his eyes; the man nearest him shrank back in terror.

"I am the man," he said slowly, taking deliberate breath between his sentences, "who gave up those greenbacks to the robbers. I am one of the three passengers you have lampooned in that paper, and these gentlemen beside me are the other two." He stopped and looked around him. "You don't believe that three men can back down six! Well, I'll show you how it can be done. More than that, I'll show you how one man can do it; for, by the living God, if you don't hand over that paper I'll kill you where you sit! I'll give you until I count ten; if one of you moves he and you are dead men—but you first!"

Before he had finished speaking Hale and Rawlins had both risen, as if in concert, with their weapons drawn. Hale could not tell how or why he had done so, but he was equally conscious, without knowing why, of fixing his eye on one of the other party, and that he should, in the event of an affray, try to kill him. He did not attempt to reason; he only knew that he should do his best to kill that man and perhaps others.

"One," said Clinch, lifting his derringer, "two—three!"

"Look here, Colonel—I swear I didn't know it was you. Come—d—n it! I say—see here," stammered Stanner, with white cheeks, not daring to glance for aid to his stupefied party.

"Four—five—six!"

"Wait! Here!" He produced the paper and threw it on the floor.

"Pick it up and hand it to me. Seven—eight!"

Stanner hastily scrambled to his feet, picked up the paper, and handed it to the Colonel.

"I was only joking, Colonel," he said, with a forced laugh.

"I'm glad to hear it. But as this joke is in black and white, you wouldn't mind saying so in the same fashion. Take that pen and ink and write as I dictate. 'I certify that I



"Take that pen and paper and write as I dictate."

am satisfied that the above statement is a base calumny against the characters of Ringwood Clinch, Robert Rawlins and John Hale, passengers, and that I do hereby apologize to the same.' Sign it. That'll do. Now let the rest of your party sign as witnesses."

They complied without hesitation; some, seizing the opportunity of treating the affair as a joke, suggested a drink.

"Excuse me," said Clinch quietly, "but as this house ain't big enough for me and that man, and as I've got business at Wild Cat Station with this paper, I think I'll go without drinkin'." He took the keys from his pocket, unlocked the doors, and taking up his overcoat and rifle turned as if to go.

Rawlins rose to follow him; Hale alone hesitated. The rapid occurrences of the last half hour gave him no time for reflection. But he was by no means satisfied of the legality of the last act he had aided and abetted, although he admitted its rude justice, and felt he would have done so again. A fear of this, and an instinct that he might be led into further complications if he continued to identify himself with Clinch and Rawlins; the fact that they had professedly abandoned their quest, and that it was really supplanted by the presence of an authorized party whom they had already come in conflict with—all this urged him to remain behind. On the other hand, the apparent desertion of his comrades at the last moment was opposed both to his sense of honor and the liking he had taken to them. But he reflected that he had already shown his active partisanship, that he could be of little service to them at Wild Cat Station, and would be only increasing the distance from his home; and above all, an impatient longing for independent action finally decided him. "I think I will stay here," he said to Clinch, "unless you want me."

Clinch cast a swift and meaning glance at the enemy, but looked approval. "Keep your eyes skinned, and you're good for a damn o' em," he said, sotto voce, and then turned to Stanner. "I'm going to take this paper to Wild Cat. If you want to communicate with me hereafter you know where I am to be found, unless"—he smiled grimly—"you'd like to see me outside for a few minutes before I go."

"It is a matter that concerns the stage company, not me," said Stanner, with an attempt to appear at his ease.

Hale accompanied Clinch and Rawlins through the kitchen to the stables. The latter, Dick, had already returned to the rescue

"I shouldn't like to leave many men alone with that crowd," said Clinch, pressing Hale's hand; "and I wouldn't have allowed your staying behind if I didn't know I could let you pile on your own. Your offerin' to stay just puts a clean finish on it. Look yer, Hale, I didn't cotton much to you at first; but ef you ever want a friend, call on Ringwood Clinch."

"The same here, old man," said Rawlins, extending his hand as he appeared from a hurried conference with the old woman at the woodshed, "and trust to Zeenie to give you a hint of there's anythin' underhanded goin' on. So long."

Half inclined to resent this implied suggestion of protection, yet half pleased at the idea of a confidence with the handsome girl he had seen, Hale returned to the room. A whispered discussion among the party ceased on his entering, and an awkward silence followed, which Hale did not attempt to break as he quietly took his seat again by the fire. He was presently confronted by Stanner, who, with an affectation of easy familiarity, crossed over to the hearth.

"The old kernel's d-d peppery and high toned when he's got a little more than his regular three fingers o' corn juice, eh?"

"I must beg you to understand distinctly, Mr. Stanner," said Hale, with a return of his habitual precision of statement, "that I regard any slighting allusion to the gentleman who has just left not only as in exceedingly bad taste coming from you, but very offensive to myself. If you mean to imply that he was under the influence of liquor, it is my duty to undeceive you; he was so perfectly in possession of his faculties as to express not only his own but my opinion of your conduct. You must also admit that he was discriminating enough to show his objection to your company by leaving it. I regret that circumstances do not make it convenient for me to exercise that privilege; but if I am obliged to put up with your presence in this room, I strongly insist that it is not made unendurable with the addition of your conversation."

The effect of this deliberate and passionless declaration was more discomposing to the party than Clinch's fury. Utterly unaccustomed to the ideas and language suddenly confronting them, they were unable to determine whether it was the real expression of the speaker, or whether it was a vague badinage or affectation to which any reply would involve them in ridicule. In a country terrorized by practical joking they did not doubt but that this was a new form of boasting calculated to provoke some response that would constitute them as victims. The immediate effect upon them was that complete silence in regard to himself that Hale desired. They drew together again and conversed in whispers, while Hale, with his eyes fixed on the fire, gave himself up to some what late and useless reflection.

He could scarcely realize his position. For however he might look at it, within a space of twelve hours he had not only changed some of his most cherished opinions, but he had acted in accordance with that change in a way that made it seem almost impossible for him ever to recant. In the interests of law and order he had engaged in an unlawful and disorderly pursuit of criminals, and had actually come in conflict, not with the criminals, but with the only party apparently authorized to pursue them. More than that, he was finding himself committed to a certain sympathy with the criminals. Twenty-four hours ago, if any one had told him that he would have condoned an illegal act for its abstract justice, or assisted to commit an illegal act for the same purpose, he would have felt himself insulted. That he knew he would not now feel it an insult perplexed him still more. In these circumstances the fact that he was separated from his family, and as it were from all his past life and traditions by a chance accident, did not disturb him greatly; indeed, he was for the first time a little doubtful of their probable criticism on his inconsistency, and was by no means in a hurry to subject himself to it.

Lifting his eyes, he was suddenly aware that the door leading to the kitchen was slowly opening. He had thought he heard it creek once or twice during his deliberate reproof to Stanner. It was evidently moving now so as to attract his attention, without disturbing the others. It presently opened sufficiently wide to show the face of Zeenie, who, with a gesture of caution toward his companions, beckoned him to join her. He rose carelessly as if going out, and, putting on his hat, entered the kitchen as the retreating figure of the young girl glided lightly toward the stables. She ascended a few open steps as if to a hay loft, but stopped before a low door. Pushing it open, she preceded him into a small room, apparently under the roof, which scarcely allowed her to stand upright. By the light of a stable lantern hanging from a beam he saw that, though poorly furnished, it bore some evidence of feminine taste and habitation. Motivating to the only chair, she seated herself on the edge of the bed, with her hands clasping her knees in her familiar attitude. Her face bore traces of recent agitation, and her eyes were shining with tears. By the closer light of the lantern he was surprised to find it was from laughter.

"I reckoned you'd be right lonely down there with that Stanner crowd, particularly after that little speech o' your'n, so I set to maw I'd get you up yer for a spell. Maw and I heard you exhort 'em! Maw allowed you was talkin' a furrin tongue all along, but I—sakes alive!—I had to hump myself to keep from bustin' into a yell when yer jist drew them Webster unbridged sentences on 'em." She stopped and rocked backward and forward with a laugh that, subdued by the proximity of the roof and the fear of being overheard, was by no means unusual. "I'll tell yer what got me, though! That part commencing: 'Suchamstances over which I've no control.'"

"Oh, come! I didn't say that," interrupted Hale, laughing.

"Don't make it convenient for me to ex-

plain," she continued; "but if I wasn't disposed, with your room, the least I can say is that it's a d-d sight better than your company—or suthin' like that. And then the way you natural your steps and let your voice rise and fall just as easy as if you was a First Reader in large type. Why, the house wasn't nowhere. His cousin didn't come within a mile o' yours. That Stanner jist turned yaller."

"I'm afraid you are laughing at me," said Hale, not knowing whether to be pleased or vexed at the girl's amusement.

"I reckon I'm the only one that dare do it, then," said the girl, simply. "The kernel saw the way you turned round after he'd done his cussin', and said yer believed you'd stay and take the responsibility of the whole thing—and did in that kam, soft, did anybody speak to-me style—was the neatest thing he'd ever yet! No! Maw says I ain't much on manners, but I know a man when I see him."

For an instant Hale gave himself up to the delicious flattery of unexpected, unintended and apparently uninterested compliments. Becoming at last a little embarrassed under the frank curiosity of the girl's dark eyes he changed the subject.

"Do you always come up here through the stables?" he asked, glancing round the room, which was evidently her own.

"I reckon," she answered, half abstractedly. "There's a ladder down there to maw's room—pointing to a trap door beside the broad chimney that serves as a wall—but it's handier the other way, and nearer the horses ef you want to get away quick."

This palpable suggestion—borne out by what he remembered of the other domestic details—that the house had been planned with reference to sudden foray or escape reawakened his former uneasy reflections. Zeenie, who had been watching his face, added, "It's no slouch, when bar or painters hang round nights and stampe the stock, to be able to swing yourself on to a boss, whenever you hear a row goin' on outside."

"Do you mean that you?"

"Paw used, and I do now, sense I've come into the room." She pointed to a nondescript garment, half cloak, half habit, hanging on the wall. "I've been outer bed and on Pitchpine's back as far ez the trail five-minutes arter I heard the first bellow."

Hale regarded her with undisguised astonishment. There was nothing at all American or horsey in her manners, nor was there even the robust physical contour that might have been developed through such experiences. On the contrary she seemed to lazily effeminate in body and mind. Headless of his critical survey of her, she beckoned him to draw his chair nearer, and, looking into his eyes, said:

"Whatever possessed you to take to huntin' men?"

Hale was staggered by the question, but nevertheless endeavored to explain. But he was surprised to find that his explanation appeared stilted even to himself, and he could not doubt, was utterly incomprehensible to the girl. She nodded her head, however, and continued:

"Then you haven't anythin' agin' George?"

"I don't know George," said Hale, smiling.

"My proceeding was against the highwayman."

"Well, he was the highwayman."

"I mean it was the principle I objected to—a principle that I consider highly dangerous."

"Well, he is the principal, for the others only helped, I reckon," said Zeenie, with a sigh, "and I reckon he is dangerous."

Hale saw it was useless to explain. The girl continued:

"What made you stay here instead of goin' on with the kernel? There was suthin' else besides you wantin' to make that Stanner take water. What is it?"

A light sense of the propliquity of beauty, of her confidence, of their isolation, of the eloquence of her dark eyes, at first tempted Hale to a reply of simple gallantry; a graver consideration of the same circumstances froze it upon his lips.

"I don't know," he returned awkwardly.

"Well, I'll tell you," she said. "You didn't cotton to the kernel and Rawlins much more than you did to Stanner. They ain't your kind."

In his embarrassment Hale blundered upon the thought he had honorably avoided.

"Suppose," he said, with constrained laugh, "I had stayed to see you?"

"I reckon I ain't your kind, neither," she replied promptly. There was a momentary pause, when she rose and walked to the chimney. "It's very quiet down there," she said, stooping and listening over the roughly boarded floor that formed the ceiling of the room below. "I wonder what's goin' on."

In the belief that this was a delicate hint for his return to the party he had left, Hale rose, but the girl passed him hurriedly, and, opening the door, cast a quick glance into the stable beyond.

"Just as I reckoned—the horses are gone too. They've skeddaddled," she said, blankly.

Hale did not reply. In his embarrassment a moment ago the idea of taking an equally sudden departure had flashed upon him. Should he take this as a justification of that impulse, or how? He stood irresolutely gazing at the girl, who turned and began to descend the stairs silently. He followed. When they reached the lower room they found it as they had expected—deserted.

"I hope I didn't drive them away," said Hale, with an uneasy look at the troubled face of the girl. "For I really had an idea of going myself a moment ago."

She remained silent, gazing out of the window. Then, turning with a slight shrug of her shoulders, she said, but deferring:

"What's the use now! Oh, maw! the Stanner crowd hev vanquished the house, and they're stranger kalkilatin' to stay!"

CHAPTER VII

A week had passed at Eagle's Court—a week of mirrored events and sunshiny by day.

[To be continued.]