

SNOW BOUND AT EAGLE'S

BY BETT HARTZ

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at rain over the green plateau and snow on the mountain by night. Each morning had brought its frore greenness to the winter girl's domain and a fresh coat of dazzling white to the barrier that separated its dwellers from the world beyond. There was little change in the encompassing wall of their prison; if anything, the snowy circle round them seemed to have drawn its lines nearer day by day. The immediate result of this restricted flight had been to confine the range of cattle to the meadows nearer the house, and at a safe distance from the fringe of wilderness now invaded by the prowling tread of predatory animals.

Nevertheless, the two figures lounging on the slope at sunset gave very little indication of any serious quality in the situation. Indeed, so far as appearances were concerned, Kate, who was returning from an afternoon stroll with Falkner, exhibited, with feminine inconsistency, a decided return to the world of fashion and conventionality just as she was actually excluded from it. She had not only discarded her white dress as a concession to the practical evidence of the surrounding winter, but she had also brought out a feather hat and sable muff which had once graced a fashionable suburb of Boston. Even Falkner had exchanged his slouch hat and picturesque serape for a heavier overcoat and fur cap of Hale's which had been pressed upon him by Kate, under the excuse of the exigencies of the season. Within a stone's throw of the chicket, turbulent with the savage forces of nature, they walked with the abstraction of people hearing only their own voices; in the face of the solemn peaks clothed with white austerity they talked gravely of dress.



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"I don't mean to say," said Kate demurely, "that you're to give up the serape entirely; you can wear it on rainy nights and when you ride over here from your friend's house to spend the evening—for the sake of old times," she added, with an unconscious air of referring to an already antiquated friendship; "but you must admit it's a little too gorgeous and theatrical for the sunlight of day and the public highway."

"But why should that make it wrong, if the experience of a people has shown it to be a garment best fitted for their wants and requirements?" said Falkner argumentatively.

"But you are not one of those people," said Kate, "and that makes all the difference. You look differently and act differently, so that there is something irreconcilable between your clothes and you that makes you look odd."

"And to look odd, according to your civilized prejudice, is to be wrong," said Falkner bitterly.

"It is to seem different from what one really is which is wrong. Now, you are a mining superintendent, you tell me. Then you don't want to look like a Spanish brigand, as you do in that serape. I am sure if you had ridden up to a stage coach while I was in it I'd have handed you my watch and purse without a word. There! you are not offended!" she added, with a laugh, which did not, however, conceal a certain earnestness. "I suppose I ought to have said I would have given it gladly to such a romantic figure, and perhaps have got out and danced a saraband or bolero with you—if that is the thing to do nowadays. Well!" she said, after a dangerous pause, "consider that I've said it."

He had been walking a little before her, with his face turned toward the distant mountain. Suddenly he stopped and faced her.

"You would have given enough of your time to the highwayman, Miss Scott, as would have enabled you to identify him for the police—and no more. Like your brother, you would have been willing to sacrifice yourself for the benefit of the laws of civilization and good order."

If a denial to this assertion could have been expressed without the use of speech, it was certainly transparent in the face and eyes of the young girl at that moment. If Falkner had been less self-conscious he would have seen it plainly. But Kate only buried her face in her lifted muff, slightly raised her getty shoulders, and, dropping her tremulous eyelids, walked on. "It seems a pity," she said after a pause, "that we cannot preserve our own miserable existence without taking something from others—sometimes even a life!" He started. "And it's horrid to have to remind you that you have yet to kill something for the invalid's supper," she continued. "I saw a hare in the field yesterday."

"You mean that jackass rabbit?" he said abruptly.

"What you please. It's a pity you didn't

take your gun instead of your rifle." "I brought the rifle for protection." "And a shotgun is only aggressive, I suppose?"

Falkner looked at her for a moment, and then, as the hare suddenly started across the open a hundred yards away, brought the rifle to his shoulder. A long interval—as it seemed to Kate—elapsed; the animal appeared to be already safely out of range, when the rifle suddenly cracked; the hare bounded in the air like a ball and dropped motionless. The girl looked at the marksman in undisguised admiration. "Is it quite dead?" she said timidly.

"It never knew what struck it." "It certainly looks less brutal than shooting it with a shotgun. John does, and then not killing it outright," said Kate. "I hate what is called sport and sportsmen, but a rifle seems—"

"What?" said Falkner.

"More—gentlemanly." She had raised her pretty head in the air, and, with her hand shading her eyes, was looking around the clear ether, and said audaciously, "I wonder—no matter."

"What is it?" "Oh, nothing." "It is something," said Falkner, with an amused smile, reloading his rifle.

"Well, you once promised me an eagle's feather for my hat. Isn't that thing an eagle?"

"I am afraid it is only a hawk." "Well, that will do. Shoot that!" Her eyes were sparkling. Falkner withdrew his own with a slight smile and raised his rifle with provoking deliberation.

"Are you quite sure it's what you want?" he asked demurely.

"Yes—quick!" Nevertheless, it was some minutes before the rifle cracked again. The wheeling bird suddenly struck the wind with its wings astant, and then fell like a plummet at a distance which showed the difficulty of the feat. Falkner started from her side before the bird reached the ground. He returned to her after a lapse of a few moments, bearing a trailing wing in his hand. "You shall make your choice," he said gayly.

"Are you sure it was killed outright?" "Head shot off," said Falkner briefly.

"And, besides, the fall would have killed it," said Kate conclusively. "It's lovely. I suppose they call you a very good shot?"

"They—who?" "Oh! the people you know—your friends and their sisters."

"George shoots better than I do, and has had more experience. I've seen him do that with a pistol. Of course not such a long shot, but a more difficult one."

Kate did not reply, but her face showed a conviction that as an artistic and gentlemanly performance it was probably inferior to the one she had witnessed. Falkner, who had picked up the hare also, again took his place by her side, as they turned toward the house.

"Do you remember the day you came, when we were walking here, you pointed out that rock on the mountain where the poor animals had taken refuge from the snow?"

"Yes," answered Falkner; "they seem to have diminished. I am afraid you were right; they have either eaten each other or escaped. Let us hope the latter."

"I looked at them with a glass every day," said Kate, "and they've got down to only four. There's a bear and that shabby, overgrown cat you call a California lion, and a wolf, and a creature like a fox or a squirrel."

"It's a pity they're not all of a kind," said Falkner.

"Why?" "There'd be nothing to keep them from being comfortable together."

"On the contrary. I should think it would be simply awful to be shut up entirely with one's own kind."

"Then you believe it is possible for them, with their different natures and habits, to be happy together?" said Falkner, with sudden earnestness.

"I believe," said Kate hurriedly, "that the bear and the lion find the fox and the wolf very amusing; and that the fox and the wolf—"

"Well?" said Falkner, stopping short.

"Well, the fox and the wolf will carry away a much better opinion of the lion and bear than they had before."

They had reached the house by this time, and for some occult reason Kate did not immediately enter the parlor, where she had left her sister and the invalid, who had already been promoted to a sofa and a cushion by the window, but proceeded directly to her own room. As a maneuver to avoid meeting Mrs. Hale, it was scarcely necessary, for that lady was already in advance of her on the staircase, as if she had left the parlor a moment before they entered the house. Falkner, too, would have preferred the company of his own thoughts, but Lee, apparently the only unpreoccupied, all pervading and boyishly alert spirit in the party, hailed him from within, and obliged him to present himself on the threshold of the parlor with the hare and hawk's wing he was still carrying. Eying the latter with affected concern, Lee said gravely: "Of course, I can eat it, Ned, and I dare say it's the best part of the fowl, and the hare isn't more than enough for the women, but I had no idea we were so reduced. Three hours and a half gunning, and only one hare and a hawk's wing. It's terrible."

Perceiving that his friend was alone, Falkner dropped his burden in the hall and strode rapidly to his side. "Look here, George, we must—I must—leave this place at once. It's no use talking; I can stand this sort of thing no longer."

"Nor can I, with the door open. Shut it, and say what you want quick, before Mrs. Hale comes back. Have you found a trail?"

"No, no; that's not what I mean."

"Well, it strikes me it ought to be, if you expect to get away. Have you proposed to Bessie Street, and she thinks it rather pre-

matize on a week's acquaintance?" "No; but—"

"But you will, you mean? Don't, just yet."

"But I cannot live this perpetual lie."

"That depends. I don't know how you're lying when I'm not with you. If you're walking round with that girl, singing hymns and talking of your class in Sunday school, or if you're insinuating that you're a millionaire, and think of buying the place for that kind of lying. But, on the other hand, I don't see the necessity of your dancing round here with a shot gun, and yelling for Harkins' blood, or counting that package of greenbacks in the lap of Miss Scott, to be truthful. It seems to me there ought to be something between the two."

"But, George, don't you think—you are on such good terms with Mrs. Hale and her mother—that you might tell them the whole story? That is, tell it in your own way; they will bear anything from you and believe it."

"Thank you; but suppose I don't believe in lying either?"

"You know what I mean! You have a way, don't you, of making everything seem like a matter of course, and the most natural thing going."

"Well, suppose I did. Are you prepared for the worst?"

Falkner was silent for a moment and then replied, "Yes; anything would be better than this suspense."

"I don't agree with you. Then you would be willing to have them forgive us?"

"I don't understand you."

"I mean that their forgiveness would be the worst thing that could happen. Look here, Ned. Stop a moment; listen at that door."

Mrs. Hale has the tread of an angel, with the pervading capacity of a cat. Now, listen! I don't pretend to be in love with anybody here, but if I were I should hardly take advantage of a woman's helplessness and solitude with a sensational story about myself. It's not giving her a fair show. You know she won't turn you out of the house."

"No," said Falkner, reddening; "but I should expect to go at once, and that would be my only excuse for telling her."

"Go! where? In your preoccupation with that girl you haven't even found the trail by which Manuel escaped. Do you intend to camp outside the house and make eyes at her when she comes to the window?"

"Because you think nothing of flirting with Mrs. Hale," said Falkner bitterly, "you care little!"

"My dear Ned," said Lee, "the fact that Mrs. Hale has a husband and knows that she can't marry me puts us on equal terms. Nothing that she could learn about me hereafter would make a flirtation with me any less wrong than it would be now, or make her seem more a victim. Can you say the same of yourself and that Puritan girl?"

"But you did not advise me to keep aloof from her; on the contrary, you—"

"I thought you might make the best of the situation and pay her some attention, because you could not go any further."

"You thought I was utterly heartless and selfish, like—"

"Ned!"

Falkner walked rapidly to the fireplace and returned.

"Forgive me, George—I'm a fool—and an ungrateful one."

Lee did not reply at once, although he took and retained the hand Falkner had impulsively extended. "Promise me," he said slowly, after a pause, "that you will say nothing yet to either of these women. I ask it for your own sake and this girl's, not for mine. If, on the contrary, you are tempted to do so from any Quixotic idea of honor, remember that you will only precipitate something that will oblige you, from that same sense of honor, to separate from the girl forever."

"I don't understand."

"Enough!" said he, with a quick return of his old reckless gaiety. "Shoot-off-his-mouth, the beardless boy chief of the Sierras, has spoken! Let the pale face with the black moustache ponder and beware how he talks her after to the Rippling Cochituate Water! Go!"

Nevertheless, as soon as the door had closed upon Falkner, Lee's smile vanished. With his colorless face turned to the fading light at the window, the hollows in his temples and the lines in the corners of his eyes seemed to have grown more profound. He remained motionless and absorbed in thought so deep that the light rustle of a skirt, that would at other times have thrilled his sensitive ear, passed unheeded. At last, throwing off his reverie with the full and unrestrained sigh of a man who believes himself alone, he was startled by the soft laugh of Mrs. Hale, who had entered the room unperceived.

"Dear me! How portentous! Really, I almost feel as if I were interrupting a tete-a-tete between yourself and some old flame. I haven't heard anything so old-fashioned and conservative as that since I have been in California. I thought you never had any Past out here!"

Fortunately his face was between her and the light, and the unmistakable expression of annoyance and impatience which passed over it was spared her. There was, however, still enough dissonance in his manner to affect her quick feminine sense, and when she drew nearer to him it was with a certain maiden-like timidity.

"You are not worse, Mr. Lee, I hope! You have not over exerted yourself?"

"There's little chance of that with one leg—if not in the grave at least mummified with bandages," he replied, with a bitterness new to him.

"Shall I kiss them? Perhaps they are too tight. There is nothing so irritating to one as the sensation of being tightly bound."

The light touch of her hand upon the rug that covered his knees, the thoughtful tenderness of the blue veined lids, and the delicate atmosphere that seemed to surround her like a perfume cleared his face of its shadow and brought back the reckless fire into his blue eyes.

"I suppose I'm intolerant of all bonds," he said, looking at her intently, "in others as well as myself!"

Whether or not she detected any double meaning in his words she was obliged to accept the challenge of his direct gaze and, raising her eyes to his, drew back a little from him with a slight increase of color. "I was afraid you had heard bad news just now."

"What would you call bad news?" asked Lee, clasping his hands behind his head and leaning back on the sofa, but without withdrawing his eyes from her face.

"Oh, any news that would interrupt your convalescence or break up our little family party," said Mrs. Hale. "You have been getting on so well that really it would seem cruel to have anything interfere with our life of forgetting and being forgotten. But," she added with apprehensive quickness, "has anything happened? Is there really any news from—from the trails? Yesterday Mr. Falkner said the snow had recommenced in the pass. Has he seen anything, noticed anything different?"

"She looked so very pretty, with the rare, genuine and youthful excitement that transfigured her wearied and wearying regularity of feature, that Lee contented himself with drinking in her prettiness as he would have inhaled the perfume of some flower."

"Why do you look at me so, Mr. Lee?" she asked, with a slight smile. "I believe something has happened. Mr. Falkner has brought you some intelligence."

"He has certainly found out something I did not foresee."

"And that troubles you?"

"It does."

"Is it a secret?"

"No."

"Then I suppose you will tell it to me at dinner," she said, with a little tone of relief.

"I am afraid if I tell it at all I must tell it now," he said, glancing at the door.

"You must do as you think best," she said, coldly, "as it seems to be a secret after all." She hesitated. "Kate is dressing, and will not be down in some time."

"So much the better. For I am afraid that Ned has made a poor return to your hospitality by falling in love with her."

"Impossible! He has known her for scarcely a week."

"I am afraid we won't agree as to the length of time necessary to appreciate and love a woman. I think it can be done in seven days and four hours, the exact time we have been here."

"Yes; but as Kate was not in when you arrived, and did not come until later, you must take off at least one hour," said Mrs. Hale gayly.

"Ned can. I shall not abate a second."

"But are you not mistaken in his feelings?" she continued hurriedly. "He certainly has not said anything to her."

"That is his last hold on honor and reason. And to preserve that little intact he wants to run away at once."

"But that would be very silly."

"Do you think so?" he said, looking at her fixedly.

"Why not?" she asked in her turn, but rather faintly.

"I'll tell you why," he said, lowering his voice with a certain intensity of passion unlike his usual boyish lightheartedness. "Think of a man whose life has been one of alternate hardness and aggression, of savage disappointment and equally savage successes, who has known no other relaxation than dissipation or extravagance; a man to whom the idea of the domestic hearth and family ties only meant weakness, effeminacy, or—worse; who had looked for loyalty and devotion only in the man who battled for him at his right hand in danger, or shared his privations and sufferings. Think of such a man, and imagine that an accident has suddenly placed him in an atmosphere of purity, gentleness and peace, surrounded him by the refinements of a higher life than he had ever known, and that he found himself, as in a dream, on terms of equality with a pure woman who had never known any other life and yet would understand and pity his. Imagine his loving her! Imagine that the first effect of that love was to show him his own inferiority and the immeasurable gulf that lay between his life and hers! Would he not fly rather than brave the disgrace of her awakening to the truth? Would he not fly rather than accept even the pity that might tempt her to a sacrifice?"

"But—is Mr. Falkner all that?"

"Nothing of the kind, I assure you!" said he demurely. "But that's the way a man in love feels."

"Really! Mr. Falkner should get you to plead his cause with Kate," said Mrs. Hale with a faint laugh.

"I need all my persuasive powers in that way for myself," said Lee boldly.

Mrs. Hale rose. "I think I hear Kate coming," she said. Nevertheless, she did not move away. "It is Kate coming," she added hurriedly, stopping to pick up her work basket, which had slipped with Lee's hand from her own.

It was Kate, who at once flew to her sister's assistance, Lee deploring from the sofa his own utter inability to aid her. "It's all my fault, too," he said to Kate, but looking at Mrs. Hale. "It seems I have a faculty of upsetting existing arrangements without the power of improving them, or even putting them back in their places. What shall I do? I am willing to hold any number of skeins or rewind any quantity of spoils. I am even willing to forgive Ned for spending the whole day with you, and only bringing me the wing of a hawk for supper."

"That was all my folly, Mr. Lee," said Kate, with swift mendacity; "he was all the time looking after something for you, when I begged him to shoot a bird to get a feather for my hat. And that wing is so pretty."

"It is a pity that mere beauty is not edible," said Lee, gravely, "and that if the worst comes to the worst here you would probably prefer me to Ned and his appetites, merely because I've been tied by the leg to this sofa

and slowly fattened like a pig." Nevertheless his mendacity seemed to amuse Kate, and she presently seemed herself to reject her sister, who had slipped from the room. For the first time during their enforced seclusion a sense of restraint and uneasiness affected Mrs. Hale, her sister and Falkner at dinner. The latter addressed himself to Mrs. Scott almost exclusively. Mrs. Hale was fain to bestow an exceptional and marked tenderness on her little daughter Minnie, who, however, by some occult childish instinct, insisted on sharing it with Lee, her great friend, to Mrs. Hale's uneasy consciousness. Nor was Lee slow to profit by the child's suggestion, but responded with certain vicarious caresses that increased the mother's embarrassment. That evening they retired early, but in the intervals of a restless night Kate was aware, from the sound of voices in the opposite room, that the friends were equally wakeful.



"It's all my fault, too," he said to Kate.

A morning of bright sunshine and a soft, warm air did not, however, bring any change to their new and constrained relations. It only seemed to offer a reason for Falkner to leave the house very early for his daily rounds, and gave Lee that occasion for unaided exercise with an extempore crutch on the veranda which allowed Mrs. Hale to pursue her manifold duties without the necessity of keeping him company. Kate also, as if to avoid an accidental meeting with Falkner, had remained at home with her sister. With one exception, they did not make their guests the subject of their usual playful comments, nor, after the fashion of their sex, quote their ideas and opinions. That exception was made by Mrs. Hale.

"You have had no difference with Mr. Falkner," she said, carelessly.

"No," said Kate, quickly. "Why?"

"Only thought he seemed rather put out at dinner last night, and you didn't propose to go and meet him to-day."

"He must be bored with my company at times, I dare say," said Kate, with an indifference quite inconsistent with her rising color. "I shouldn't wonder if he was a little vexed with Mr. Lee's chaffing him about his sport yesterday, and probably intends to go further to-day and bring home larger game. I think Mr. Lee very amusing always, but I sometimes fancy he lacks feeling."

"Feeling! You don't know him, Kate," said Mrs. Hale quickly. She stopped herself, but with a half smiling recollection in her dropped eyelids.

"Well, he doesn't look very amiable now, stamping up and down the veranda. Perhaps you'd better go and soothe him."

"I'm really so busy just now," said Mrs. Hale, with sudden and inconsequent energy; "things have got dreadfully behind in the last week. You had better go, Kate, and make him sit down, or he'll be overdoing it. These men never know any medium—in anything."

"Contrary to Kate's expectation, Falkner returned earlier than usual, and, taking the invalid's arm, supported him in a more ambitious walk along the terrace before the house. They were apparently absorbed in conversation, but the two women who observed them from the window could not help noticing the almost feminine tenderness of Falkner's manner toward his wounded friend and the thoughtful tenderness of his ministering care.

"I wonder," said Mrs. Hale, following them with softly appreciative eyes, "if women are capable of as disinterested friendship as men? I never saw anything like the devotion of these two creatures. Look! if Mr. Falkner hasn't got his arm round Mr. Lee's waist, and Lee, with his own arm over Falkner's neck, is looking up in his eyes. I declare, Kate, it almost seems an indiscretion to look at them."

Kate, however, to Mrs. Hale's indignation, threw her pretty head back and sniffed the air contemptuously. "I really don't see anything but some absurd sentimentalism of their own, or some manish wickedness they're concocting by themselves. I am by no means certain, Josephine, that Lee's influence over that young man is the best thing for him."

"On the contrary! Lee's influence seems the only thing that checks his waywardness," said Mrs. Hale quickly. "I'm sure, if any one makes sacrifices it is Lee; I shouldn't wonder that even now he is making some concession to Falkner, and all those caressing ways of your friend are for a purpose. They're not much different from us, dear."

"Well, I wouldn't stand there and let them see me looking at them as if I couldn't bear them out of my sight for a moment," said Kate, whisking herself out of the room. "They're concealed enough, heaven knows, already."

That evening at dinner, however, the two men exhibited no trace of the restraint or meanness of the previous day. If they were less impulsive and exuberant, they were still frank and interested, and if the turn could be used in connection with men apparently trained to neither self-control nor reserve, there was a certain gentle dignity in their manner which for the time had the effect of

[To be continued.]