

SNOW BOUND AT EAGLE'S

BY BRET HARTE

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strang them a little above the social level of their entertainers. For even with all their predisposition to the strangers, Kate and Mrs. Hale had always retained a conscious attitude of gentle condescension and superiority toward them—an attitude not inconsistent with a stronger feeling, nor altogether unprovocative of it; yet this evening they found themselves impressed with something more than an equality in the men who had turned and interested them, and they were perhaps a little more critical and doubtful of their own power. Mrs. Hale's little girl, who had appreciated only the seriousness of the situation, had made her own application of it. "Are you down in away from Aunt Kate and mamma?" she asked, in an interval of silence.

"How else can I get you the red snow we saw at sunset the other day on the peak yonder?" said Lee, gayly. "I'll have to get up some morning very early and catch it when it comes at sunrise."

"What is this wonderful snow, Minnie, that you are tormenting Mr. Lee for?" asked Mrs. Hale.

"Oh! it's a fairy snow that he told me all about; it only comes when the sun comes up and goes down, and if you catch ever so little of it in your hand it makes all you flink you want come true! Wouldn't that be nice?" But to the child's astonishment her little circle of auditors, even while assenting, sighed.

The red snow was there plain enough the next morning before the valley was warm with light, and while Minnie, her mother and aunt Kate were still peacefully sleeping. And Mr. Lee had kept his word and was evidently seeking it, for he and Falkner were already urging their horses through the pass, with their faces toward and lit up by its glow.

CHAPTER VIII.

Kate was stirring early, but not as early as her sister, who met her on the threshold of her room. Her face was quite pale, and she held a letter in her hand. "What does this mean, Kate?"

"What is the matter?" asked Kate, her own color fading from her cheek.

"They are gone—with their horses. Left before day, and left this."

She handed Kate an open letter. The girl took it hurriedly, and read:

"When you get this we shall be no more; perhaps not even as much. Ned found the trail yesterday, and we are taking the first advantage of it before day. We dared not trust ourselves to say 'Good-by' last evening; we were too cowardly to face you this morning; we must go as we came, without warning, but not without regret. We leave a package and a letter for your husband. It is not only our poor return for your gentleness and hospitality, but, since it was accidentally the means of giving us the pleasure of your society, we beg you to keep it in safety until his return. We kiss your mother's hands. Ned wants to say something more, but time presses, and I only allow him to send his love to Minnie, and to tell her that he is trying to find the red snow."

"But he is not fit to travel," said Mrs. Hale. "And the trail—it may not be passable."

"It was passable the day before yesterday," said Kate drearily, "for I discovered it, and went as far as the buck-eyes."

"Then it was you who told them about it," said Mrs. Hale reproachfully.

"No," said Kate indignantly. "Of course I didn't." She stopped, and, reading the significance of her speech in the glistening eyes of her sister, she blushed. Josephine kissed her and said:

"It was treating us like children, Kate, but we must make them pay for it hereafter. For that package and letter to John means something, and we shall probably see them before long. I wonder what the letter is about, and what is in the package?"

"Probably one of Mr. Lee's jokes. He is quite capable of turning the whole thing into ridicule. I dare say he considers his visit here a prolonged jest."

"With his poor leg, Kate? You are as unfair to him as you were to Falkner when they first came."

Kate, however, kept her dark eyebrows knitted in a piquant frown.

"To think of his intimating what he would allow Falkner to say! And yet you believe he has no evil influence over the young man."

Mrs. Hale laughed. "Where are you going as fast, Kate?" she called, mischievously, as the young lady flounced out of the room.

"Where? Why, to tidy John's room. He may be coming at any moment now. Or do you want to do it yourself?"

"No, no," returned Mrs. Hale, hurriedly, "you do it. I'll look in a little later on."

She turned away with a sigh. The sun was shining brilliantly outside. Through the half-open blinds its long shafts seemed to be searching the house for the lost guests, and making the hollow shell appear doubly empty. What a contrast to the dark days of mysterious seclusion and delicious security, lit by Lee's laughter and the sparkling hearts, which had passed so quickly! The forgotten outer world seemed to have returned to the house through those open windows and awakened its dwellers from a dream.

The morning seemed interminable, and it was past noon, while they were deep in a sympathetic conference with Mrs. Scott, who had drawn a pathetic word picture of the two friends perishing in the snowdrift, with wet flannels, brandy, smelling salts or jelly, what they had forgotten, when they were startled by the loud harking of Spot on the lawn before the house. The women looked anxiously at each other.

"They have returned," said Mrs. Hale.

Kate ran to the window. A horseman was approaching the house. A single glance showed her that it was neither Falkner, Lee nor Hale, but a stranger.

"Perhaps he brings some news of them," said Mrs. Scott, quickly. So complete had been their preoccupation with the loss of their guests that they could not yet conceive of anything that did not pertain to it.

The stranger, who was at once ushered into the parlor, was evidently disconcerted by the presence of the three women.

"I reckoned to see John Hale yep," he began, awkwardly.

A slight look of disappointment passed over their faces. "He has not yet returned," said Mrs. Hale briefly.

"Sho! I w-ter know. He's had time to do it, I reckon," said the stranger.

"I suppose he hasn't been able to get over from the Summit," returned Mrs. Hale. "The trail is closed."

"It ain't now, for I kem over it this mornin' myself."

"You didn't meet any one?" asked Mrs. Hale timidly, with a glance at the others.

"No."

A long silence ensued. The unfortunate visitor plainly perceived an evident abatement of interest in himself, yet he still struggled politely to say something. "Then I reckon you know what kept Hale away?" he said dubiously.

"Oh, certainly—the stage robbery."

"I wish I'd known that," said the stranger reflectively, "for I es good es rode over jist to tell it to ye. Ye see, John Hale, he sent a note to ye 'splainin' matters by a gentleman; but the road agents tackled that man, and left him for dead in the road."

"Yes," said Mrs. Hale impatiently.

"Luckily he didn't die, but kem to and managed to crawl inter the bush, whar I found him when I was lookin' for stock, and brought him to my house."

"You found him? Your house?" interrupted Mrs. Hale.

"Inter my house," continued the man doggedly. "I'm Thompson of Thompson's Pass over you; mebbe it ain't much of a house, but I brought him thar. Well, ez he couldn't find the note that Hale had giv him, and like ez not the road agents had gone through him and got it, en soon ez the weather let up I made a break over yer to tell ye."

"You say Mr. Lee came to your house," repeated Mrs. Hale, "and is there now?"

"Not much," said the man grimly; "and I never said Lee was thar. I mean that Bilson was shot by Lee and kem."

"Certainly, Josephine!" said Kate, suddenly stepping between her sister and Thompson, and turning upon her a white face and eyes of silencing significance; "certainly—don't you remember—that's the story we got from the Chinaman, you know, only muddled. Go on, sir," she continued, turning to Thompson calmly; "you say that the man who brought the note from my brother was shot by Lee?"

"And another fellow they call Falkner. Yes, that's about the size of it."

"Thank you; it's nearly the same story that we heard. But you have had a long ride, Mr. Thompson; let me offer you a glass of whisky in the dining room. This way, please."

The door closed upon them none too soon. For Mrs. Hale already felt the room whirling around her and sank back into her chair with an hysterical laugh. Old Mrs. Scott did not move from her seat, but, with her eyes fixed on the door, impatiently waited Kate's return. Neither spoke, but each felt that the young, untried girl was equal to the emergency and would get at the truth.

The sound of Thompson's feet in the hall and the closing of the front door was followed by Kate's reappearance. Her face was still pale, but calm.

"Well!" said the two women in a breath.

"Well," returned Kate, slowly, "Mr. Lee and Mr. Falkner were undoubtedly the two men who took the paper from John's messenger and brought it here."

"You are sure!" said Mrs. Scott.

"There can be no mistake, mother."

"Then," said Mrs. Scott, with triumphant feminine logic, "I don't want anything more to satisfy me that they are perfectly innocent!"

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"But John will be here soon; what are we to tell him! And then that package and that letter."

"Don't be in a hurry to tell him anything at present, my child," said Mrs. Scott gently. "It is unfortunate that Mr. Thompson called here, but we are not obliged to understand what he says now about John's message, or to connect our visitors with his story. I'm

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The two women kissed Mrs. Scott with a feeling of relief, and fell back into the monotony of their household duties. It is to be feared, however, that the absence of their outlawed guests was nearly as dangerous as their presence in the opportunity it afforded for uninterrupted and imaginative reflection. Both Kate and Josephine were at first shocked and wounded by the discovery of the real character of the two men with whom they had associated so familiarly, but it was no disparagement to their sense of propriety to say that the shock did not last long, and was accompanied with the fascination of danger. This was succeeded by a consciousness of the delicate flattery implied in their indirect influence over the men who had undoubtedly risked their lives for the sake of remaining with them. The best woman is not above being touched by the effect of her power over the worst man, and Kate at first allowed herself to think of Falkner in that light. But if in her later reflections she suffered as a heroic experience to be forgotten, he gained something as an actual man to be remembered. Now that the proposed rides from "his friend's house" were a part of the illusion, would he ever dare to visit them again? Would she dare to see him? She held her breath with a sudden pain of parting that was new to her; she tried to think of something else, to pick up the scattered threads of her life before that eventful day. But in vain; that one week had filled the place with implacable memories, or more terrible, as it seemed to her and her sister, they had both lost their feeble, alien hold upon Eagle's Court in the sudden presence of the real geni of these solitudes, and henceforth they alone would be strangers there. They scarcely dared to confess it to each other, but this return to the dazzling sunlight and cloudless skies of the past appeared to them to be one unreal experience; they had never known the true wild flavor of their home except in that week of delicious isolation. Without breathing it aloud, they longed for some vague disengagement to this experience that should take them from Eagle's Court forever.

It was noon the next day when the little household beheld the last shred of their illusion vanish like the melting snow in the strong sunlight of John Hale's return. He was accompanied by Col. Clinch and Rawlins, two strangers to the women. Was it fancy or the avenging spirit of their absent companions? But he, too, looked a stranger, and as the little cavalcade wound its way up the slope he appeared to sit his horse and wear his hat with a certain slouch and absence of his usual restraint that strangely shocked them. Even the old half-condescending, half-punctilious gallantry of his greeting of his wife and family was changed, as he introduced his companions with a mingling of familiarity and shyness that was new to him. Did Mrs. Hale regret it, or feel a sense of relief in the absence of his usual seigniorial formality? She only knew that she was grateful for the presence of the strangers, which for the moment postponed a matrimonial confidence from which she shrank.

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"Don't be in a hurry to tell him anything at present, my child," said Mrs. Scott gently. "It is unfortunate that Mr. Thompson called here, but we are not obliged to understand what he says now about John's message, or to connect our visitors with his story. I'm

sure, Kate, I should have treated them exactly as we did if they had come without any message from John; so I do not know why we should lay any stress on that, or even speak of it. The simple fact is that we have opened our house to two strangers in distress. Your husband," continued Mr. Hale's mother-in-law, "does not require to know more. As to the letter and package, we will keep that for further consideration. It cannot be of much importance or they would have spoken of it before; it is probably some trifling present as a return for your hospitality. I should use no indecorous haste in having it opened."

The two women kissed Mrs. Scott with a feeling of relief, and fell back into the monotony of their household duties. It is to be feared, however, that the absence of their outlawed guests was nearly as dangerous as their presence in the opportunity it afforded for uninterrupted and imaginative reflection. Both Kate and Josephine were at first shocked and wounded by the discovery of the real character of the two men with whom they had associated so familiarly, but it was no disparagement to their sense of propriety to say that the shock did not last long, and was accompanied with the fascination of danger. This was succeeded by a consciousness of the delicate flattery implied in their indirect influence over the men who had undoubtedly risked their lives for the sake of remaining with them. The best woman is not above being touched by the effect of her power over the worst man, and Kate at first allowed herself to think of Falkner in that light. But if in her later reflections she suffered as a heroic experience to be forgotten, he gained something as an actual man to be remembered. Now that the proposed rides from "his friend's house" were a part of the illusion, would he ever dare to visit them again? Would she dare to see him? She held her breath with a sudden pain of parting that was new to her; she tried to think of something else, to pick up the scattered threads of her life before that eventful day. But in vain; that one week had filled the place with implacable memories, or more terrible, as it seemed to her and her sister, they had both lost their feeble, alien hold upon Eagle's Court in the sudden presence of the real geni of these solitudes, and henceforth they alone would be strangers there. They scarcely dared to confess it to