

A NIGHT IN THE DIVIDE.

BY BRET HARTE.

With a dulling of the wind toward evening it came to snow—heavily, in straight, quickly succeeding flakes, dropping like white lances from the sky. This was followed by the usual Sierran phenomena. The deep gorge, which, as the sun went down, had lapsed into darkness, presently began to reappear; at first the vanished trail came back as a vividly whitening streak in the night; then the firs and pines that ascended to the business against the hillside glimmered in ghostly distinctness, until at last the two slopes curved out of the darkness as if woven in marble. For the sudden storm, which extended scarcely two miles, had left no trace upon the steep, granite face of the high cliffs above; the snow slipping silently from them, left them still hidden in the obscurity of night. In the canyon and on the gorge alone stood out, set in a chaos of cloud and storm through which the moonbeams struggled ineffectually.

It was this unexpected sight which burst upon the occupants of a large, covered "station wagon" who had chanced upon the lower end of the gorge. Coming from a party to lower altitudes, they had been struck by the storm which had momentarily ceased, but had left a record of intensity in nearly two feet of snow. For some moments the snow floundered and struggled on, but the travelers believed to be some old-fashioned drift or avalanche until the extent and frequency of the fall became apparent. To add to their difficulties the wind, which commenced, and not comprehending its real character and limit they did not dare to attempt to return the way they came. To go on, however, was impossible, in this quandary they looked about them in vain for some other exit from the gorge. The sides of that gigantic white furrow terminated in dark, jagged summits in from the world in all directions it might have been their tomb.

But, although they could see nothing beyond their prison walls, they themselves were perfectly visible from the heights above them. And Jack Tenbrook, quartz miner, who was sinking a tunnel in a rocky ledge of shelf above the gorge, stepping out from his cabin at 10 o'clock to take a look at the weather before turning in, could observe distinctly the outline of the black wagon, the floundering horses, and the crouching figures by its side, scarcely larger than penguins on the white surface of snow, a thousand feet below him. Jack had courage and strength and a good humor that accompanies them, but he contented himself for a few moments with lazily observing the travelers' discomfiture. He had taken in the situation with a glance; he would have helped a brother miner or mountaineer, although he knew that it could only have been drink or brandy that brought him into a snow storm, but it was very evident that these were "greenhorns" or eastern tourists, and it served their stupidity and arrogance right; he remembered also how he had once helped an eastern visitor catch the mustang that had "bucked" him, and had been called "my man," and presented with \$5; he recalled how he had once spread the humble resources of his cabin before some straying members of the San Francisco party who were "opening" the new railroad, and heard the audible wonder of a lady that a civilized being could live so "coarsely." With these recollections in his mind he managed to survey the distant struggling horses with a fine sense of humor, not unmingled with righteousness; it meant at the worst a delay and a camping in the snow till morning, when he would be able to get on his feet. They had a spacious traveling equipage, and were, no doubt, well supplied with furs, robes, and provisions for a several hours' journey; his own pack was empty and his blankets worn. He half smiled, extended his long arms in a decided yawn, and turned back into the cabin to be greeted by a fine glance around the interior. Everything was all right; his loaded rifle stood against the wall; he had just raked ashes over the embers of his fire to keep it intact till morning. Only one thing slightly troubled him; a grizzly bear, two-thirds grown, but only half tamed, which had been given him by a young lady named "Mingles," when that charming and historic girl had decided to accompany her paralytic lover to the San Francisco hospital, was missing that morning. It had been his regular habit to come to the door every night for some sweet biscuit or sugar before going to his lair in the underbrush behind the cabin. Everybody knew that was the length and breadth of Hemlock Ridge, as well as the fact of its being a legacy of the fair exile and her mother, who had raised against his lazy bulk or the stupid, small-eyed head and ruff of circling hairs made more erect by his well-worn leather collar. Consoling himself with the thought that the storm had probably delayed its return, Jack took off his coat and threw it on a bunk, and sat down to eat some of the storm his thoughts naturally returned to the woman there, and that settled it. Yet he had arrived at this conclusion from no sense of gallantry, nor, indeed, of chivalrous transport, but of a simple, sane, and sane night as simply as an eastern man would have offered his seat in an omnibus to a woman.

Having resumed his coat, with a bottle of whiskey thrust into his pocket, he put on a pair of India rubber boots blacking from his thighs and, catching the blanket from his bunk, started with an axe and saw on his shoulder on his downward journey. When the distance was half completed he saw the travelers below; the cry was joyously answered by three men and a woman, and the fourth figure, now unmistakably that of a slender, youthful woman, in a cloak, helped back into the wagon, as if deliverance was now sure and danger past. Jack, on arriving, speedily despatched that illusive hope; they could only get through the gorge by taking off the wheels of the wagon, and placing the axle on rude sleds run on split saplings, which, with their assistance, he would fashion in a couple of hours at his cabin and help them to the top. Then, if only other alternative would be for them to come to his cabin and remain there while he went for assistance to the nearest station. "Very well," said Jack, "I'll wait here no time to be lost; unitch your horses and we'll dig a hole in that bank for them to stand in out of the snow. This was hardly done, "Now," continued Jack, "you'll just follow me up to my cabin; it's a pretty tough climb, but I'll wait help to bring down the runners.



BUT AT THE MOMENT THERE WAS ANOTHER SHOCK TO THE WAGON.

father, "you can keep the wagon and the whole gorge in sight from the trail all the way up. So you can see that everything's all right. Why, I saw you from the first." He stopped awkwardly and added: "Come along, the sooner we're off the quicker the job's over."

"Pray, don't delay the gentleman and the lady," said Miss Amy, sweetly.

"I'm not," said Jack, "I'm suggesting her father followed him with the driver and the second man of the party, a youngish and somewhat unattractive individual, but whose gallant anxieties Miss Amy responded to. Nevertheless the young lady had especially noted Jack's confession that he had had them when they first entered the gorge. "And I suppose," she added to herself mentally, "that he sat there with his boozing companions, laughing and jeering in the face of the snow and the wind."

But when the sound of her companions' voices died away and their figures were swallowed up in the darkness behind the snow she forgot all this and all that she had heard of the length and breadth of Hemlock Ridge, and the fact of its being a legacy of the fair exile and her mother, who had raised against his lazy bulk or the stupid, small-eyed head and ruff of circling hairs made more erect by his well-worn leather collar. Consoling himself with the thought that the storm had probably delayed its return, Jack took off his coat and threw it on a bunk, and sat down to eat some of the storm his thoughts naturally returned to the woman there, and that settled it. Yet he had arrived at this conclusion from no sense of gallantry, nor, indeed, of chivalrous transport, but of a simple, sane, and sane night as simply as an eastern man would have offered his seat in an omnibus to a woman.

he expected to get out and look after the horses in the snow. Anyhow, she wouldn't! She was a good deal safer where she was—she might have been rats or mice about that frightened them. Goodness! She was still wondering with curious wonder the continued fright of the animals when suddenly she felt the wagon half bumped, half lifted from behind. It was such a lazy, deliberate movement that for a moment she thought it came from the party who had returned noiselessly with the runners. She scrambled over to the back seat, unbuttoned the leather curtain, lifted it, but nothing was to be seen. Consequently, with feminine quickness, she said: "I see you perfectly, Mr. Waterhouse—don't be silly!" But at this moment there was another shock to the wagon and from beneath it arose what at first seemed to her to be an uplifting of the drift itself, but the snow was shaken away from the heavy bulk, proved to be the enormous head and shoulders of a bear!

Yet even then she was not wholly frightened, for the animal had a feeble inoffensiveness; the small eyes were bright with an eager, almost childish, curiosity rather than a savage ardor, and the whole attitude of the creature looked upon his hind legs was circus-like and ludicrous rather than aggressive. She was enabled to say with some dignity, "Go away—Shoo!" and to wave her hand, as if with exemplary firmness. But here the creature laid one paw on the back seat as if to steady itself, with the singular effect of collapsing the whole side of the wagon, and then opened its mouth as if in some sort of inarticulate reply. But the revelation of its black tongue, its unbuttoned teeth, and all the hot, carnivorous fume of its breath, brought the first scream from the lips of Miss Amy. It was real and convincing; the horses shied in a moment and were together. The bear hesitated for an instant, then, catching sight of the honey pot on the front seat, which the shrinking back of the young girl had disclosed, he slowly reached forward his other paw and attempted to grasp it. This exceedingly simple movement, however, at once brought up the front seat, sent the honey pot a dozen feet into the air and dropped Miss Amy upon her knees in the bed of the wagon. The comical mental and physical shock was much for her; she instantly and sincerely faltered, the last thing in her ears might like a bullet striking the wagon, and "whir!" of a bullet and the sharp crack of a rifle.

She recovered her consciousness in the flickering light of a fire bark, that lay upon the rafters of a roof thatched with bark and upon a floor of straw and shredded bark. She even remembered that she was lying upon a mattress of bark underneath a heavy bearskin she could feel and touch. And a delicious sense of warmth and mingled with a strange desire for freedom, even a sense of home protection, she saw her father at her side. He briefly explained the situation. They had been at first attracted by the cry of the frightened horses and their plunging, which they could see distinctly, although they saw nothing else.

"But, Mr. Tenbrook?" "Mr. Who?" said Amy, staring at the rafter.

"The owner of this cabin—the man who helped us—caught up his gun, and calling trail. At first we followed the cry, and knowing, for we could only see the struggling horses, who, however, seemed to be alone, and the wagon from which you did not seem to have stirred, we called on the first time, my dear child, we suddenly saw your danger. Imagine how we felt as that hideous brute roared at us, and began attacking the wagon. We called on Tenbrook to fire, but for some inconceivable reason he did not, although he still kept running at the top of his speed. Then we heard you shriek."

"I didn't shriek, papa; it was the horses." "My child, I knew your voice." "Well, it was only a very little scream because I had tumbled." The color was coming back rapidly to her pink cheeks.

"And, then, as you were running, Tenbrook fired—it was a wonderful shot for the distance, so everybody says—and killed the bear, though Tenbrook says it oughtn't to have been. I believe he wanted to see you safe alive. They're queer notions, these hunters. And then, as you were unconscious, he brought you up here."

"Who brought me here?" "Tenbrook; he's as strong as a horse. Slung you up on his shoulder like a feather pillow." "Oh!" "And then, as the wagon required some repairing from the brute's attack, we continued to take it leisurely, and let you rest here for awhile."

"And where is—where are they?" "At work on the wagon. I determined to stay with you, though you are perfectly safe here."

"I suppose I ought to thank this man, papa?" "Most certainly, though, of course, I have already done so. But he was rather curt in reply. These half-savage men have such singular ideas. He said the bear would never have attacked you if he had known you were safe here."

"At work on the wagon. I determined to stay with you, though you are perfectly safe here."

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It will be trodden upon and crushed! Couldn't you run down, ahead of me, and warn them, papa dear? Mr. Tenbrook will have to go so slowly with me." She tumbled out of the wagon and lay on the ground, she felt the cold earth against her face, and she knew that she was alone. She tried to get up, but she was too weak. She heard a sound of hooves, and she knew that the horses were coming. She tried to call out, but she was too weak. She felt a hand on her shoulder, and she knew that she was being helped. She looked up, and she saw the man who had helped her. She felt a sense of relief, and she knew that she was safe.

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