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James Higgins

Betty Jane Wagner

James Moffett, Senior Editor

# Adventure Stories **2**



# ADVENTURE STORIES **2**

James Higgins and Betty Jane Wagner

James Moffett, Senior Editor

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# SNOW BLIND

Gene Caesar

The first warning sensation that young Randy Carlson felt was a strange tightening of the skin around his eyes and a weird flashing that seemed to be coming from behind them. Then, very abruptly, there was a horrible searing pain like molten metal being flung in his face.

He stopped, swaying unsteadily on his snowshoes, pressing a snow-dusted mitten to his eyes. Then he kept on going.

*He had to keep going.* He was still far above the timberline. The highest reaches of stunted spruce growth were no more than a distant trace of green in the white glare, far off down a series of snow-covered slopes.

The searing pain came again and again, steadily more frequent and intense. Randy began closing his eyes for long periods of time, opening them just briefly to see where he was or regain his balance, then closing them again.

It was no use. Finally, after keeping his eyes shut for several minutes, he discovered that the sunlight burn had puffed the flesh around them so fully that he could not force them open.

He was totally blind now, at least a half-dozen miles from any chance of help in a snow-muted world where his loudest shouts would carry no more than a few hundred yards. He was blind and alone in the high country.

This day that became a nightmare in bright sunlight began with exciting anticipation. If Randy Carlson had been asked to write a theme or give a classroom talk on just what it was that he found so wonderful about winter hiking on snowshoes, he probably would have failed miserably. There were no words for the freshness of snow before sunrise, when padmarks and hoofprints were a vivid story in white, recording every movement made on the wild land in the secret darkness. There were no words for the unbelievable beauty of spruce plumes and pine branches dusted with new snow, or for the magic dawn spectacle of a half-frozen waterfall glowing a soft blue color in early light.

Randy had never really minded the fact that his father and brothers didn't share his special delight in winter hiking, preferring instead to be fishing through the ice from the warm shanties on the lake far below. He intended to join them there the following day; the day after that, they would put on their snowshoes to accompany him. But for several years, his first thought on any visit to the family cabin had been for a hike up through the ridges and canyons.

That morning he had new snowshoes to test, a gift on his recent sixteenth birthday, and he set out to test them, at the earliest possible moment when he was just barely able to make out the shape of the shore growth against the snow. He had thrilled immediately to the firmness and ease with which they took him up through the drifts.

Wearing light insulated clothing, he took nothing but a waterproof matchbox, a knife, a compass and a packed lunch in the big pocket of his parka. In the lower ridges, he found a straight, slim sapling to cut as a staff to carry.

The day was overcast, but before going on above the timberline, into the world of sheer whiteness, Randy still checked to make sure his sunglasses were in the case on his belt. Then, through the late morning hours, he circled far to the north, making a great rambling arc on the open face of the sierra.

Suddenly he stumbled on a granite outcropping hidden beneath the drifts. Sliding roughly on sharp stone, he

fought to keep his head above the loose, powdery snow. He finally struggled free of the drifts, suffering nothing worse than bruises, and shuffled on more cautiously — only to discover that the case had broken loose from his belt and his sunglasses were gone.

He returned to the spot where he'd fallen and searched for more than an hour, fumbling and probing beneath the snow. He wasn't too worried at first. The sky above was still clouded solidly.

But then, with amazing abruptness, the gusty, spasmodic wind broke the clouds. A patch of sunlight materialized on the snow-blanketed slopes, widening with fantastic speed and trapping him far above the timberline.

Randy Carlson hesitated for some time, balanced between his fading hopes of finding the sunglasses and his dread of crossing miles of high country in sunlight without them. Then he set out directly west, homeward through terrain where not a single treetop broke the white smoothness, where the reflected intensity of the brightness magnified itself many times over as it bounced from ridge to ridge in the clear, thin air. He shielded his face as best he could, hoping against hope that the sky would cloud over again or that his eyes would hold out until he could reach cover and escape the deadly brilliance.

The sun was too bright, though, and his pace too slow on the treacherous slopes. The nearest clusters of spruce were still as hazy and distant as a mirage below when the terrible, burning pains came and his sight failed him entirely.

Randy steadied himself, choked back a sickening sense of hopelessness, and tried to form a mental picture of what lay between him and the cabin. He'd been hoping to reach a trail that followed down an even slope of pine woods. But on either side of that slope, broken and irregular canyons fanned off in patterns too complex to remember.

*Could he possibly grope his way down — blinded?* He didn't know. He only knew there was nothing to be gained by standing still any longer.

The torture in his closed eyes was still intense. He began stepping slowly ahead, prodding his way along with





the staff, testing the firmness beneath each snowshoe before he let his weight come down. He stumbled often at first, floundering awkwardly in the deep drifts.

Then, little by little, the knack of keeping his balance without being able to see came to him. Within an hour he was moving slowly but steadily along, following only the feel of the slopes beneath him. Whenever he felt himself climbing instead of moving downhill, he turned back and tried a different direction.

*If I can just reach the trees, he thought. If I can just get out of the sun to rest, maybe I can get my eyes open again.*

But hour after hour went by, and he still hadn't reached the timberline. He became ever more fearful that he'd wandered far to one side or the other of the wooded slope for which he'd been heading. That would mean broken and twisted canyon country to cross below.

Then a sudden and terrifying new notion came: *Maybe he wasn't even moving west.* Sheer glacier walls rose to the very sawteeth of the sierra in the south and east, but an endless tangle of bluffs and canyons and ridges lay to the north, uninhibited and unbroken by roads or highways for some thirty or forty miles. Maybe he was heading north, deeper and deeper into total wilderness, farther and farther from any chance of finding help or safety.

Randy Carlson had rarely used the compass he carried on treks through this country. There were several other ways of determining direction — the slant of the big pines in the timbered basins below, the pattern of the lofty sierra walls, the various rock formations. But all such methods depended on his eyes. The wind was dying now, and even at its strongest, the gusting, changing high-country wind was never a safe guide for direction.

Randy slipped off a mitten and tried to force the lids of one eye apart for a quick glimpse to locate the sun in the sky, but the swelling had grown worse, and he nearly fainted from the pain. He tried standing perfectly still and turning his head slowly from side to side, hoping that the sun's direct light would brighten the white blankness he saw. He could tell nothing. With snow and ice mirroring the

sun from every ridge and peak, the brilliance seemed to come equally from all directions. Moving on seemed pointless now, but with the bitter cold soaking into him, standing still seemed even more impossible. He shuffled along slowly, for perhaps another half-hour, and the sickening fear that he was heading north instead of west grew worse with each step.

Suddenly he brushed against low-growing branches. Yanking off a mitten, he felt the plumes and needles and knew he was in a cluster of stunted spruce. The slope under his snowshoes was gentle here, and he moved on through the growth, waving his staff ahead of him to avoid tangling his snowshoes in the branches.

*If I've hit the right place, he told himself triumphantly, the trail's in the pines just a few hundred yards ahead. And it's all easy going!*

Suddenly the snow gave way and the firmness went out from under him. Grabbing instinctively with his free hand, he caught a spruce branch, stopped his fall and pulled himself slowly back up. Breathing hard, he prodded out into emptiness with his staff and knew he was on the brink of a cliff.

He could remember no cliffs near the pine-forested slope he'd hoped to reach. He must have wandered well to the left or the right of his goal, perhaps even far to the north, directly away from the lake and the cabin.

It felt much colder now, and the blankness before his eyes had darkened. Randy guessed night had come, but darkness neither helped nor hindered his blind efforts. Never before had he dreamed just how completely he depended upon his eyes. Never before had he even imagined the world in which a blind person lives. The sudden fear that his own sight was gone forever, that his eyes were permanently damaged, brought a new burst of sickening panic.

He fought off despair and tried to think clearly again. His father would probably be searching for him soon, calling for him in the night, then following his trail by flashlight up the staircase of ridges that bordered the lake. But in the vastness of the dark wilderness, his chances of being found were almost nonexistent.

*If I'm going to get out of this, he realized, I'm going to have to do it mostly myself.*

It was this realization, as much as the cold, that drove him on. He worked his way back through the spruces, then moved to the left very slowly, prodding the snow ahead repeatedly with his staff before taking a step. There was no wind now, no sound except those he himself made. His breathing seemed incredibly loud in the frozen stillness.

He was certain he'd skirted the cliff when he came to a cluster of thickly tangled trees. The branches blocked his snowshoes, and he had to force his way through the tight growth.

All at once, his feet went out from under him again. This time he couldn't stop himself. For a split second that seemed much longer, he knew the hollow-sick sensation of dropping down through empty air. Then he crashed hard into snow that half buried him.

He hadn't let go of his staff. Lying still, he probed in all directions and finally realized he was on a ledge. He tried for some time to climb back up, but the bluff was too steep.

Moving as close to the edge as he dared, he reached down with his staff. He couldn't touch bottom, but he brushed the branches of a tree and realized it must be growing up from the cliff base below. He caught some of the limbs, broke them off and tossed them down one by one. From the time it took them to strike and the faint noise they made in the absolute stillness, he could guess two things — that it was some twenty to thirty feet down to the base of the cliff, and that soft snow waited below.

There was nothing he could do but try climbing down the tree. As much as he hated to risk losing his snowshoes, he had to drop them and the staff over the edge, then lean out into the limbs of the tree and swing across. He gripped tight with his hands and carefully tried each branch for footing before letting down his weight. But even so, about halfway down, a dead limb snapped beneath his foot; his numb hands wouldn't hold him, and he crashed on down through the growth.

He landed hard, but the deep drifts kept him from being hurt. He had a long moment of near panic as he strug-

gled about looking for his snowshoes; finally he found them and tied them on. He didn't wait to search further for his staff. He was just fully realizing how exhausted he was. The cold stabbed completely through him, grating on his every nerve end. Even with the numbness in his feet, each step seemed to drive an ice pick up through the sole.

He shuffled down what seemed to be the brushy bottom of a small canyon. Finally, where a deadwood-filled thicket lay tight to a jumble of rock slabs, he decided to rest and try to get a fire going. He broke dead branches and feathered some of them with his knife, half-certain he would cut himself in his blind groping. The making of a fire seemed an impossible task at that moment. Getting the first twigs lighted by feel alone took a half-dozen matches, and he burned his fingers twice.

But the fire finally blazed, and he had little trouble breaking more branches to feed it. He wrestled with the trunk of a deadfall until he was certain it lay across the flames. Then, with the rock slab behind him serving as a reflector, he let himself relax in the wonderful warmth.



Bitter cold roused him. He had no way of knowing how long he had slept, but he felt as though the fire had been out for hours. Its remembered warmth seemed as distant and unreal now as the memory of being able to see.

He tried to push up from the stone, but he couldn't move. Not one muscle in his body would respond. His mind seemed alone now, trapped in numb, unfeeling flesh.

"No!" he heard himself cry out. "No!"

His lips and jaws had worked, he realized. Then, stiffly and slowly, he was able to lift his arms and beat them feebly against his chest. He tried to get up, but he could feel nothing in his legs and they collapsed beneath him.

Dragging himself to the nearest deadfall, he started the long, difficult job of getting the fire going again. His fingers were so numb that he had to hold his knife between the palms of both hands, but after endless fumbling and slow struggle, the warmth was back.

The pain of thawing out seemed worse than the pain of growing cold. He had to slide back from the fire and grit his teeth against the throbbing hurt that racked his entire body. But at last he could walk again and use his fingers.

He could ease the pain around his eyes by pressing snow against them, but he couldn't reduce the swelling enough to get his eyelids open. He knew he needed medical help and needed it badly. Much sooner than he really wanted to, he cut himself a new staff, scraped snow over the fire, and started on.

He soon groped his way into a region of thickly tangled trees, split by a creek with stretches of noisy, ice-free rapids. He knew that several creeks led to the lake where the cabin waited. But, on the other hand, the endless wilderness to the north was also veined with creeks.

*If only he could be sure he was heading west!*

Following the twists of the half-frozen stream very slowly, Randy searched his memory determinedly for some way of telling direction without his eyes, trying to form a mental picture of every stretch of terrain he could recall from years of hiking through this country. And when the answer finally came — a vaguely sensed piece of knowledge that had never before been formalized into a conscious realization — it was so simple that it seemed unbelievable.

In canyons and gullies that ran east-west, only spruces would grow on the south side — the side that faced north and received more moisture. But pines, needing less moisture, often grew on the north side. He could visualize numerous canyons like that, with pines glistening green in sunlight on one slope and spruces and pines alike looking blue in shade on the other.

He left the creek and began climbing the slope on his right, pulling off his mitten and feeling the needles of the trees.

He found spruce clusters, but he also found stands of the longer-needed dwarf pines. Feeling his way back down to the creek, he listened and tested with his staff until he reached a stretch of solid ice, then crossed and moved up the opposite slope. Through a long fumbling search, he could find nothing but spruces.

He had to move on along the twists and turns of the canyon-bottom stream and make several more tests, but his confidence and wild relief grew steadily. *He was moving west! Every step was taking him closer and closer to the lake and the highway and home!*

This knowledge put a fresh sureness in his movements, gave him new warmth and strength. In his closed eyes black darkness gave way to gray-white darkness, then the stabbing, hurting brightness again. But it didn't matter. At any moment, he kept reassuring himself, his probing staff might touch a culvert or bridge that meant he'd reached the lakeside highway.

He knew that his father and perhaps even state troopers and volunteers from the nearest town would be out searching for him, and he began shouting for help every minute or so. There was no answer but muffled echoes, and yet he gradually realized that those echoes were giving him a vague outline of the horizons on both sides. Bit by bit, his senses filled in that outline from other sources.

The morning wind in the trees could create a picture of those trees from the unrealized recollection of the sound of wind in trees on other hikes. The feel of snow beneath him could evoke an image of similar drifts and swirls crossed on earlier winter treks. Even the faint scents that

came to him and the spasmodic birdsong he heard had meaning now.

With his sight gone, his other senses seemed to be sharpening rapidly, and his memory was becoming incredibly vivid. The feel of the branches he touched, the murmur of open rapids and the silence of ice-locked eddies — everything was merging in his imagination to create an ever-clearer picture of the world he couldn't see.

All at once, the snow gave way beneath him, tripping him and sending him sprawling forward. He swung his staff instinctively across his chest to break his fall, but there was nothing for it to catch. Down and down into deep, powdery snow that seemed to draw him on like quicksand he sank. His face slid beneath the surface. His attempts at breathing drew snow into his nose and mouth.

He stumbled into a deep, drift-filled gorge.

Through the long afternoon, the night and the morning of struggle and ordeal, this was to be the worst moment of despair. For the first time since his eyes had failed, back in the high country, he felt like giving up, letting go, letting the merciless winter world have him. But he forced himself to keep on fighting.

The staff was still in his mittened hand. Moving as little as possible to keep from sinking deeper, he probed behind him and struck solid ground. With his lungs beginning to rebel, twisting and tightening inside him, he wormed his way back to the frozen bluff and clawed frantically to climb it.

His breath and strength were giving out. His awareness was dimming in waves of dizziness. But his head finally broke above the snow, and a great rush of air slammed down his throat. With the last remnants of his strength and will, he pulled himself up to lie still on solid snow, his breath coming in great rasping gasps, his entire body twitching convulsively.

He lay there a long time, then pushed himself up and stumbled slowly off, moving wide of the gorge and again cautiously inching his way. All of the confidence and sureness had left him, and strength and warmth seemed drained from his body. He no longer trusted the mental picture gained without sight, and he began shouting for help more

often, more frantically — until each call for help became a painful rasping in his throat and lungs.

It didn't matter. Answering shouts came, then became steadily louder as he stood still and kept calling, "Here!" Then his father's voice and the voices of other men were around him and he was safe at last. It wasn't until some time later that he learned he'd made his way back to within a few hundred yards of the lakeside highway, no more than a half mile from his home.

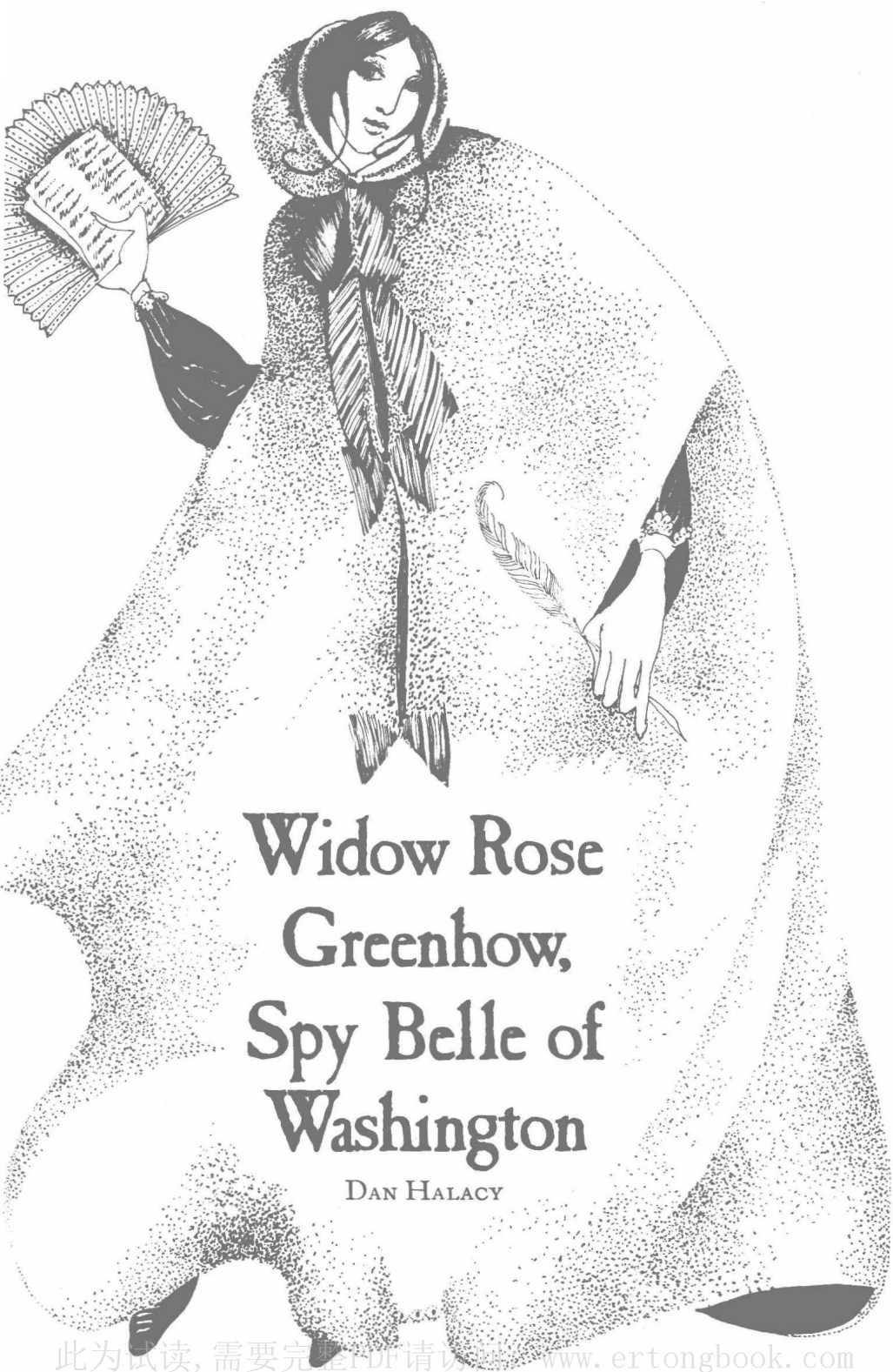
A few hours later, Randy lay in a hospital bed, and a doctor was assuring him that no permanent damage had been done to his eyes.

"You'll be seeing again soon enough. Just as soon as we get that swelling down. What possessed you to go out alone, in the wilderness, I can't figure. You sure chose a hard way to learn not to." The doctor paused. "I bet you've also learned something few people realize — what a terrible thing it would be to lose your eyes and spend the rest of your life blind."

Randy Carlson was quiet for a long time, thinking of the way his hearing and touch and other senses had begun sharpening to fill the void left by his lost eight, and how imagination had served as something of a sixth sense in helping him visualize the world he couldn't see. He was excited by what he'd discovered, eager to tell of the depths of self-realization the ordeal had meant for him. But there were really no words to explain it.

"It wouldn't be the end of the world, though," he finally answered. "A guy could learn to get along."





Widow Rose  
Greenhow,  
Spy Belle of  
Washington

DAN HALACY