

Mrs, Reed, Keseberg, Reed, Eddy

SUTTER. You are here, are you not, Madam, to serve as a character witness for Mr. Keseberg?

MRS. REED. I am here to carry out my duty as a proper Christian woman, which is to serve the truth.

SUTTER. Well spoken, Mrs. Reed. Proceed, Mr. Keseberg. *(Mrs. Reed looks at her husband seeking his forbearance. Keseberg positions himself between them.)*

KESEBERG. In earlier accounts, Mrs. Reed, we established that our party had made permanent camp at Lake Truckee. But with food in such short supply, and everyone facing slow starvation, it was imperative that whoever could, should leave at the first opportunity. We would have to go out. In early November, a month before the departure of the Snowshoe Party, the company made its first major attempt to cross over the great rock wall of the Sierra Nevada. No doubt you remember . . . ?

MRS. REED. That venture was doomed from the start.

KESEBERG. Did everyone join in the attempt?

MRS. REED. More than half. Captain Sutter had sent out two young Indian lads from this Fort. Having some knowledge of the terrain, they acted as our guides.

KESEBERG. Did you hold a good opinion of these young men?

MRS. REED. Indeed. Those boys were risking their lives to rescue us. It grieved me when I heard afterwards that they'd perished.

KESEBERG. You mean coming out with the Snowshoe Party . . . *(Foster, greatly agitated, whispers something inaudible to Reed.)*

REED. Alcalde. Surely this line of questioning is a waste of precious time—isn't it?

SUTTER. Mr. Keseberg, let your witness speak to the point.

KESEBERG. As you wish, Herr Sutter.

EDDY. *(In response to a whispered aside from Foster.)* Not now.

REED. *(Intercepting the covert exchange.)* Something I should know?

EDDY. Nothing!

REED. Excuse me, Alcalde, please go on.

KESEBERG. Madam, You and the others were setting out to cross the final summit.

MRS. REED. We were hopeful in the beginning but that changed all too sudden. What with overloaded wagons which soon had to be left behind, and then having to carry the smaller children, that first day out we did not get far.

KESEBERG. How far did we go?

MRS. REED. A distance of two—three miles, if that.

KESEBERG. And the summit?

MRS. REED. Clear ahead, still just a couple of miles off. But it might just as well have been a thousand. We had to make a halt.

KESEBERG. Just short of the pass! Were you aware of the critical nature of that decision?

MRS. REED. Barely.

KESEBERG. Mr. Eddy and Mr. Foster, they were along—were they aware?

MRS. REED. By then we were all so worn down and chilled, so low in spirit, we were beyond caring. However, I remember, when it came time to take you down off your horse, sir, you put up a protest.

KESEBERG. Can you remember my words?

MRS. REED. Of course. You begged us not to quit there. Urged us to push on with the remaining horses and get beyond the ridge before making a halt. You feared a change in the weather. But no one paid any attention, I'm sorry to say. You were the only person there who saw the danger clear.

KESEBERG. What did the party do then?

MRS. REED. Everyone just lay down right there on the ground. Some huddled around the fire. The children were bundled up in blankets and buffalo robes. We comforted ourselves with the thought—no, the false hope!—that tomorrow would see us safely over the heights.

KESEBERG. What prevented us?

MRS. REED. In the middle of the night, with everyone fast asleep, it began to fall. Snow! Heavy snow! Coming down without letup! Blinding! We were told it wouldn't happen for weeks yet. Never so early. But there it was. And it fell on our heads like an icy judgment from hell! No one had to say anything because everybody already knew: This storm was bringing certain death!

KESEBERG. Did everyone just accept death as inevitable?

MRS. REED. Most everyone I could see—except you, sir. You struggled to your feet and, even though you were unfit—*(To defendants.)* Yes, unfit! *(Back to Keseberg.)* You began crying out. Hobbling from one group to another, shaking people, shouting at them to rouse up, save themselves.

KESEBERG. What did this accomplish?

MRS. REED. At first it was like a graveyard. But then heads began