

AT "HAYS."

A Tale of Love, Desertion, and Disobedience.

BY BRET HARTE.

CHAPTER I.

It was difficult to say if Hays' farmhouse, or "Hays," as it was familiarly called, looked any more bleak and cheerless than winter afternoon than it usually did in the strong summer sunshine. Painted a cold, mottled white with scant projection for shadows, a roof of white pine shingles, bleached lighter through sun and wind, and covered with low, white-capped chimneys, it looked even more stark and chilly than the drifts which had climbed its low roadside fence, and yet seemed hopeless of gaining a foothold on the glancing walls, or slippery wind-swept roof. The storm, which had already heaped the hollows of the road with snow, had hurled its finely granulated flakes against the building, but they were whirled along gutters and ridges and disappeared in smoke-like puffs across the icy roof. The granite outcrop in the hillside behind had long ago whitened and vanished; the dwarf fir and larches, which had at first taken uncouth shapes in the drift, blended vaguely together, and then merged into an unbroken wave. But the gaunt angles and right angles which the building retained sharp and unchanged. It would seem as if the rigors of winter had only accentuated their hardness, as the fierceness of summer had previously made them intolerable.

It was believed that so an of this unyielding grimness attached to Hays himself. Certain it is, that neither hardship nor prosperity had touched his character. Years ago his emigrant team

angular figure as it had from his roof-ridge, for when he entered the narrow hallway his pilot jacket was unmarked, except where a narrow line of powdered flax outlined the seams as if from. To the right was an apartment, half of a dark and chilly iron safe, a sofa and chairs covered with black and coldly shining horsehair. Here Hays not only removed his upper coat, but his under one also, and drawing a chair before the fire, sat down in his shirt sleeves. It was his usual rustic pioneer habit, and might have been some lingering reminiscence of a remote ancestor, for whom clothes were an impediment. He was warming his hands and placidly ignoring his gaunt arms in their thinly clad "hickory" sleeves, when a young girl of eighteen-sounding, half-purportedly half-English, came into the room. It was his only re-appearing daughter, already elected by circumstances to a dry household virginity, her somewhat large features, sallow complexion, and tasteless, unattractive dress did not obviously suggest a sacrifice. Since her sister's departure she had taken sole charge of her father's domestic affairs and the few rude servants he employed, with a certain inherited following of his own moods and methods. To the neighborhood she was known as "Miss Hays," a dubious respect that in a community of familiar "Sallies," "Mammies," "Pussies," was grimly prophetic. Yet she rejoiced in the Oriental appellation of "Zuleika." To this it is not to be added that it was impossible to conceive anyone who looked more decidedly Western.

"You can put some things in my carpet bag again the time the sled comes round," said her father, meditatively, without looking up.

"Then you're not coming back to-night?" asked the girl curiously. "What's going on at the Summit, father?"

"I am," he said grimly. "You don't reckon I can't stop that! I'm going on as far as Horseley's to close up the contract afore the weather changes."

"I kinder allowed it was funny you'd go to the hotel to-night. There's a dance there; those two Wetherbee girls and Mammie Harris passed up the road an hour ago on the good their foot parents to pieces, and sittin' up in the snow like skert white rabbits."

"Hays' brow darkened heavily. "Let 'em go," he said, in a harsh voice that the fire had not yet softened. "Let 'em go for all the good their fool parents will ever get out'er 'em, or the herd of wayside cattle they'll let them loose among."

"I reckon they haven't much to do at home, 'ere are hard put for company, to travel six miles in the snow, and to their prinkin' to a lot of idle louts shiny with bear's grease and scented up with doctor's stuff," added the girl, shrugging her shoulders with a touch of her father's mood and manner.

Perhaps it struck Hays at that moment that her attitude was somewhat monstrous and unnatural for one still young and presumably like other girls, for, after glancing at her under his heavy brows, he said in a gentler tone: "Never you mind, Zuly. When your brother Jack comes home, he'll know what's what, and have all the proper New York ways and style. It's nigh on three years now that he's had the best training Doctor Dawson's Academy could give, sayin' nothing of the pow'ful Christian example of one of the best preachers in the States. They mayn't have worldly, ungody fandangoes where he is, and riotous livin', and scart get aboutin' town, but I've been told that they've 'tea circles,' and 'assemblies,' and 'harmony concerts' of young folks—and dancin'—yes, fine square dancin'—under control. No, I ain't stinted him in anythin'. You can remember that, Zuleika, when you're more of a companion and backbitin' about your father's meanness. I ain't spared no money for him."

"I reckon not," said the girl, a little sharply. "Why, there is that draft for two hundred and fifty dollars that kem out 'er week from the Doctor's for extras."

"Yes," replied Hays, with a slight knitting of the brows, "the Doctor must hev writ more particklers, but parsons ain't allus business men. I reckon there's her extras were to push Jack along in the term, as the Doctor knew I wanted him back here in the spring, now that his brother has got to be too stiff-necked and self-opinionated to do his father's work." It seemed from this that there had been a quarrel between Hays and his eldest son, who conducted his branch of business at Sacramento, and who had in a passion threatened to set up a rival store adjacent to his father's. And it was also evident from the manner of the girl that she was by no means a strong partisan of her father in the quarrel. "You'd better find out just how all the school'n' and train'n' of Jack is goin' to jibe with the ranch, and if he ain't ben' educated out of all knowledge of station business or keer for it. New York ain't Hays' Ranch, and those yer Assembly and Dawson doin' their own airs and graces may put him out of conceit with our plain ways. I reckon ye didn't take that to mind when you've ben bustlin' round payin' two hundred and fifty dollars for a rival store, and you'll be with Bijah! I ain't said nothin', father, only mebbe if Bijah had drafts and extras flourishin' around him a little more, mebbe he'd have been more like me and not so tough spoken. Mebbe, s'it contains a little more in style to suit Master Jack when he comes of I had three hundred dollars' worth of convent schoolin' like Mammie Harris."

"Yes, and you'd have only made yourself fair game for ev'ry scoundrel, lazy sport or counter-jumper along the road from this to Sacramento," responded Hays, savagely.

Zuleika judged again constraintfully, but in a way that might have suggested that this dreadful contingency was still one that it was possible to contemplate without entire consternation. As she moved slowly toward the door she stopped with her hand on the lock and said tentatively:

"I reckon you won't be wanting any supper before you go? You're almost sure to be offered somethin' up at Horseley's, while if I have to cook you up suthin' now and still have the men's supper to get at seven, it makes all the expense of an extra meal."

Hays hesitated. He would have preferred his supper now, and had his daughter probed him it would have amounted to nothing. But economy, which was one of Zuleika's inherited instincts, vaguely appealing to him to be as a virtue, interchangeable with charity and abstinence, was certainly to be encouraged in a young girl. It hardly seemed possible that with an eye single to the integrity of the larder she could ever look kindly on the blandishments of his sex, or, indeed, be exposed to them. He said simply: "Don't cook for me," and resumed his attitude before the fire as the girl left the room.

As he sat there grim and immovable as one of the battered fire-dogs before him, the wind in the chimney seemed to carry on a deep-throated, dejected, and confidential conversation with him, but to realize that the words were his own, there was no haunting reminiscence of his married life in this room, which he had always occupied in preference to the company or sitting-room beyond. There were no familiar shadows of the past lurking in its corners to revive his reverie. When he did reflect, which was seldom, there was always in his mind a vague idea of a central injustice to which he had been subjected, that was to be avenged by certain movement, to be hidden by work, but never to be surmounted. And to-night he was going out in the storm, which he could understand and fight, as he had often done before, and he was going to drive a bargain with a man like himself and get the better of him if he could as he had done before, and another day would be gone, and that central injustice which he could not understand would be circumvented, and he would still be holding his own in the world.

And he, who was a hard but conscientious Providence, something like himself, would assist him, perhaps, some day to the understanding of this same vague injustice which he was for some strange reason permitting. But never more unrelenting and unsparring of others than when under conviction of sin himself, and never more harsh and unforgiving than when fresh from the contemplation of the divinity, he still sat there grimly holding his hands to a warmth that never seemed to get nearer his heart than that, until his daughter re-entered the room with his carpet bag.

He slipped on his coat and overcoat, secured a fur cap on his head by a woolen comforter, covering his ears and twined round his throat, and to rigidly offer a square and weather-beaten cheek to his daughter's dusty kiss, did not, apparently, suspect the irony of the situation. The sled was at the door, which, for a tumultuous moment, opened on the storm and the white vision of a horse knee-deep in a drift, and then closed behind him. Zuleika shot the bolt, brushed some flakes of the melting snow from the mat, and, after frugally raking down the fire on the hearth her father had just quitted, retired through the long passage to the kitchen and her domestic supervision.

It was an hour later, supper had long passed; the "hands" had one by one returned to their quarters under the roof or in adjacent lots, and Zuleika and the two maids had at last abandoned the kitchen for their bedrooms beyond. The light of a single candle, had entered the office and had dropped meditatively into a chair, as she slowly raked the warm ashes over the still smoldering fire. The barking of dogs had momentarily attracted her attention, but it had suddenly ceased. It was followed, however, by a more startling incident—a slight movement outside, and an attempt to raise the window!

She was now lightened; perhaps, there was little for her to fear; it was known that Hays kept no money in the house, the safe was only used for securities and contracts, and there were half-a-dozen men within call. It was, therefore, only her usual active, bustling curiosity for novel incident that made her run to the window and peer out; but it was with a spontaneous cry of astonishment that she turned and darted to the front door and opened it to the man before her—a young man.

"Jack! Saints alive! Why of all things!" she gasped, incoherently.

He stopped her with an impatient gesture, and a hand that prevented her from closing the door again.

"Don't shut here!" he asked, quickly.

"No."

"When'll he be back?"

"To-night."

"God," he said, turning to the door again, "he's out there, motionless horse and sleigh in the road, with a woman holding the reins."

He beckoned to the woman, who drove to the door and jumped out. Tall, handsome, and audacious, she looked at



"SO IN THERE," SAID THE YOUNG MAN.

Zuleika with a quick laugh of confidence as over some recognized absurdity. "Go in there," said the young man, opening the door to the office; "I'll come back in a minute."

As she entered, still smiling, as if taking part in some humorous or risky situation, he turned quickly to Zuleika and said, in a low voice: "Where can we talk?"

The girl held out her hand and glided hurriedly through the passage, and she reached a door, which she opened. By the light of a dying fire he could see it was her bed-room. Lighting a candle on the mantel she looked eagerly in his face as he threw aside his muffer and opened his coat. It disclosed a spare, youthful figure, and a thin, weak face that a budding mustache only seemed to make all more immature. For an instant he raised his eyes and glanced at each other. Astonishment on her

part, nervous impatience on his, apparently repressed any demonstration of family affection. Yet when she was about to speak he stopped her roughly: "There, now; don't talk. I know what you're going to say—you'd say myself if I wanted to—and it's no use. Well, then, here I am. You saw her. Well, she's my wife—we've been married three months. Yes, my wife; married three months ago. I'm here because I ran away from school—that is, I haven't been there for the last three months. I came out with her last steamer; we went up to the Summit Hotel last night—where they didn't know me—until we could see how the land lay, before popping down on dad. I happened to learn that he was out to-night, and I brought her down here to have a talk. We can go back again before he comes, you know, unless you object."

"But," interrupted the girl, with sudden practicality, "you say you ain't been at Doctor Dawson's for three months! Why, only last week he drew on dad for \$200 for your extras!"

He glanced at her and then arranged his necktie in the glass above the mantel with a nervous laugh. "Oh, that! I fixed that up myself and got the money for it in New York to pay our passage with. It's all right, you know."

CHAPTER II.

The girl stood looking at the ingenious forger with an odd, breathless smile. It was difficult to determine, however, if gratified curiosity were not its most dominant expression.

"And you've got a wife—and that's her?" she resumed.

"Where did you first meet her? Who is she?"

"She's an actress—mighty popular in 'Frisco—I mean New York. Lots of chaps tried to get her—I cut 'em out. For all that, I ain't such a fool, as Dawson's—I ain't such a fool, as Dawson's."

Nevertheless, as he stood there stroking his fair mustache, his astuteness did not seem to impress his sister to enthusiastic assent. Yet she did not relax her breathless, inquisitive smile as she went on:

"And what are you going to do about dad?"

He turned upon her querulously. "Well, that's what I want to talk about."

"You'll catch it," she said, impressively.

But here her brother's nervousness broke out in a weak, impotent fury. It was evident, too, that in spite of its apparent spontaneous irritation its intent was studied. Catch it, would he? Oh, yes! Well, she'd see who'd catch it! Not him! No, he'd had enough of this meanness, and wanted it ended! He wasn't a woman, to be treated like his sister, and to their mother, like their brother, if it came to that, for he knew how he was to be brought back to take Bijah's place in the spring; he'd heard the whole story. No, he was going to stand up for his rights—he was going to be treated like the son of a mestee who was worth half a million ought to be treated! He wasn't going to be skimped while his father was wallowing in money that he didn't know what to do with—money that by right ought to have been given to their mother and their sister. Why, even the law wouldn't permit such meanness—if he was dead. No, he'd come there with Lottie, his wife, to show his father that there was one of the family that couldn't be fooled and bullied, and wouldn't put with it any longer. There would have to be a fair division of the property, and his sister Annie's property, and hers—Zuleika's—too, if she'd have the pluck to speak up for herself. All this and more he said. Yet even while a small fury was genuine and characteristic, there was such an evident incongruity between himself and his speech that it seemed to fit him loosely, and he was aware of it.

Like another's garment, Zuleika, who had exhibited neither disgust nor sympathy with his rebellion, but had rather appeared to enjoy it as a novel domestic performance, the morality of which devolved solely upon the performer, retained her curious smile. And then a knock at the door started them.

It was the stranger—slightly apologetic and still humorous, but firm and self-confident withal. She was sorry to interrupt their family council, but the fire was going out where she sat, and she would like a cup of tea or some refreshment. She did not look at Jack, but, completely ignoring him, addressed herself to Zuleika with what seemed to be a direct challenge; in that feminine eye-grapple there was a quick, instinctive, and final struggle between the two women. The stranger triumphed. Zuleika's vacant smile changed to one of submission, and then, equally ignoring her brother in his double defeat, she hastened to the kitchen to do the visitor's bidding. The woman closed the door behind her and took Zuleika's place before the fire.

"Well," she said, in a half-contemptuous toleration.

"Well!" said Jack in an equally ill-disguised discontent, but an evident desire to placate the woman before him. "It's all right, you know. I've had my say. It'll come right, Lottie, you'll see."

The woman smiled again and glanced around the bare walls of the room.

"And I suppose," she said dryly, "when it comes right, I'm to take it the work of your sister in the charge of this workhouse and succeed to the keys of that safe in the other room?"

"It'll come all right, I tell you; you can fix things up here any way you'll like when you get the main straight," said Jack with the iteration of feebleness. "And as to that safe, I've seen it chock full of securities."

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

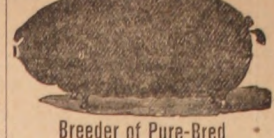
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