A WINTER NIGHT AT "HAYS."

A Tale of Love, Desertion, and Disobedience.

BY BRET HARTE.

CHAPTER II.—Continued.

"I'll hold one less to-night," she said looking at the fire.

"What are you talking about?" he asked in querulous suspicion.

She drew a paper from her pocket.

"It's that draft of yours that you were crazy enough to sign Dawson's name to. It was lying out there on the desk. I reckon it isn't a thing you care to have kept as evidence, even by your father."

She held it to the flames until it was consumed.

"By Jove, your head is level, Lottie!" he said, with an admiration that was not, however, without a weak reserve of suspicion.

"No, it isn't, or I wouldn't be here," she said, curtly. Then she added, as if dismissing the subject: "Well, what did you tell her?"

"Oh, I said I met you in New York. You see, I thought she might think it queer if she knew I only met you in San Francisco three weeks ago. Of course, I said we were married."

She looked at him with weary astonishment.

"And, of course, whether things go right or not, she'll find out that I've got a husband living, that I never met you in New York, but on the steamer, and that you've lied. I don't see the use of it. You said you were going to tell the whole thing squarely and say the truth, and that's why I came to help you."

"Yes; but don't you see, hang it all!" he stammered, in the irritation of weak confusion, "I had to tell her something. Father won't dare to tell her the truth, no more than he will the neighbors. He'll hush it up, you bet; and when we get this thing fixed you'll go and get your divorce, you know, and we'll be married privately on the square."

He looked so vague, so immature, yet so fatuously self-confident, that the woman extended her hand with a laugh and tapped him on the back as she might have patted a dog. Then she disappeared to follow Zuleika in the kitchen.

When the two women returned together they were evidently on the best terms; so much that the man with the easy reaction of a shallow nature became sanguine and exalted, even to an ostentatious exhibition of those New

"SHE HELD IT IN THE FLAMES."

York graces on which the paternal Hays had set such store. He complacently explained the methods by which he had deceived Dr. Dawson, how he had himself written a letter from his father commanding him to return to take his brother's place, and how he had shown it to the Doctor and been three months in San Francisco looking for work and assisting Lottie at the theater, until a conviction of the righteousness of his cause, perhaps combined with the fact that they were also short of money and she had no engagement, impelled him to this present heroic step; all of which Zuleika listened to with childish interest, but superior appreciation of his companion. The fact that this woman was an actress, an abomination vaguely alluded to by her father as being even more mysteriously wicked than her sister and mother, but correspondingly exciting as offering a possible permanent relief to the monotony of her home life, seemed to excuse her brother's weakness. She was almost ready to become his partisan—after she had seen her father.

They had talked largely of their plans; they had settled small details of the future and the arrangement of the property; they had agreed that Zuleika should be relieved of her household drudgery, and sent to a fashionable school in San Francisco with a music teacher and a dress maker. They had discussed everything but the precise manner in which the revelation should be conveyed to Hays. There was still plenty of time for that, for he would not return until to-morrow at noon, and it was already tacitly understood that the vehicle of transmission should be a letter from the Summit Hotel. The possible contingency of a sudden outburst of human passion not entirely controlled by religious feeling was to be guarded against.

They were sitting comfortably before the replenished fire, the wind was still moaning in the chimney, when, in a lull of the storm, the sound of sleigh bells seemed to fill the room. It was followed by a voice from without, and, with a hysterical cry Zuleika started to her feet. The same breathless smile with which she had greeted her brother an hour ago was upon her lips as she gasped:

"Lord save us! But it's dad come back!"

I grieve to say that here the doughty redresser of domestic wrongs and retriever of the family honor lapsed, white-faced, in his chair, idealess and tremulous. It was his trailer companion who rose to the occasion and even partly dragged him with her. "Go back to the hotel," she said, quickly, "and take the sled with you; you are not fit to face him now. But he does not know me, and I will stay." To the staring Zuleika: "I am a stranger, stopped by a broken sleigh on my way to the hotel. Leave the rest to me. Now clear out, both of you. I'll let him in."

She looked so confident, self-contained and superior that the thought of opposition never entered their minds, and as an impatient rapping rose from the door they let her, with a half-impatient, half-laughing gesture, drive them before her from the room. When they had disappeared in the distance she turned to the front door, unbolted and opened it. Hays blundered in out of the snow with a muttered exclamation, and then, as the light from the open office door revealed a stranger, started and fell back.

"Miss Hays is busy," said the woman quickly, "I am afraid, on my account. But my sleigh broke down on the way to the hotel, and I was forced to get out here. I suppose this is Mr. Hays?"

A strange woman—by her dress and appearance a very worldling, and even braver in looks and apparel than many he had seen in the cities—had, in spite of all his precautions, fallen short of the hotel and been precipitated upon him. Yet under the influence of some odd abstraction he was affected by it less than he could have believed. He even achieved a rude bow as he bolted the door and ushered her into the office. More than that, he found himself explaining to this fair trespasser the reasons of his return to his own home; for, like a direct man, he had a consciousness of some inconsistency in his return, or in the circumstances that induced a change of plans, which might conscientiously require an explanation.

"You see, ma'am, a rather singular thing happened to me after I passed the Summit. Three times I lost the track, got off it somehow, and found myself traveling in a circle. The third time, when I struck my own tracks again, I concluded I'd just follow them back here. I suppose I might have got the road again by trying and fightin' the snow, but there's some things not worth the fightin'. This was a matter of business, and, after, all, ma'am, business ain't everything; is it?"

He was evidently in some unusual mood, the mood that with certain reticent natures often compels them to make their brief confidence to utter strangers rather than impart them to those intimate friends who might afterward remind them of their weakness.

She agreed with him pleasantly, but not so obviously as to excite suspicion. "And you preferred to let your business go, and come back to the comfort of your own home and family?"

"The comfort of my home and family?" he repeated in a dry, deliberate voice. "Well, I reckon I ain't been tempted much by that. That isn't what I meant." But he went back to the phrase, repeating it grimly, as if it were some mandatory text. "The comfort of my own home and family! Well, Satan hasn't set that trap for my feet yet, ma'am. No! Ye saw my daughter? well that's all my family; ye see this room? that's all my home. My wife ran away from me; my daughter cleared out, too; my eldest son, as was with me here, quo'll I with me and reckons to set up a rival business against me. No," he said, still more meditatively and selfishly, "it wasn't to come back to the comforts of my own home and family that I faced round on Heavytree Hill, I reckon."

As the woman, for certain reasons, had no desire to check this suspicious and unlooked-for confidence, she patiently waited. Hays remained silent for an instant, warming his hands before the fire, and then looked up interrogatively.

"A professor of religion, ma'am, or under conviction?"

"Not exactly," said the lady, smiling. "Excuse me, but in spite of your fine clothes, I reckoned you had a serious look just now. A reader of scripture, maybe?"

"I know the Bible."

"You remember when the angel with the flaming sword appeared unto Saul on the road to Damascus?"

"Yes."

"It must hev been suthin' in that style that stopped me," he said slowly and tentatively. "Though nat'rally I didn't see anything, and only had the queer feelin'. It might hev been that that shied my mare off the track."

"But Saul was up to some wickedness, wasn't he?" said the lady, smilingly, "while you were simply going somewhere on business."

"Yes," said Hays, thoughtfully, "but my business might hev seemed like persecution. I don't mind tellin' you what it was if you'd care to listen. But mebbee you're tired. Mebbee you want to retire. You know," he went on with a sudden hospitable outburst, "you needn't be in any hurry to go; we kin take care of you here to-night, and it'll cost you nothin'. And I'll send you on with my sleigh in the mornin'. Perhaps you'll like suthin' to eat—a cup of tea—or—I'll call Zuleika," and he rose with an expression of awkward courtesy.

But the lady, albeit, with a self-satisfied sparkle in her dark eyes, here carelessly assured him that Zuleika had already given her refreshment, and, indeed, was at that moment preparing her own room for her. She begged he would not interrupt his interesting story.

Hays looked relieved.

"Well, I reckon I won't call her, for what I was goin' to say ain't exactly the sort o' thin' for an innocent, simple sort o' thing like her to hear—I mean," he interrupted himself hastily, "that folks of more experience of the world like you and me don't mind speakin' of. I'm sorter takin' it for granted that you're a married woman, ma'am."

The lady who had regarded him with sudden rigidity here relaxed her expression and nodded.

"Well," continued Hays, resuming his place by the fire, "you see this yer man I was goin' to see lives about four miles beyond the Summit on a ranch that furnishes most of the hay for the whole that side of the divide. He's bin holdin' off his next year's contract with me, hopin' to make better terms from the prospects of a late spring and higher prices. He held his head mighty high and talked of waitin' his own time. I happened to know he couldn't wait.

He put his hands on his knees and stared at the fire, and then went on:

"Ye see this man has had crosses and family trials. He had a wife that left him to join a lot of bally dancers and painted women in the dance playhouses when he was livin' in the Southern country. You'll say that was like my own case—and mebbee that was why it came to him to tell me about it—but the difference betwixt him and me was that, instead of restin' unto the Lord and findin' him, and pluckin' out the eye that offended him 'cording to the Scripture, he followed after her, tryin' to get her back, until, findin' that wasn't no use, he took a big disgust and came up here to hide hisself where there wasn't no play-house nor play-actors, and no women but Injin squaws. He pre-empted the land, and, nat'rally there bein' no one es cared to live there but himself, he had it all his own way, made it pay, and, as I was sayin' before, held his head high for prices. Well—you ain't gettin' tired, ma'am?"

"No," said the lady, resting her cheek on her hand and gazing at the fire; "it's all very interesting; and so odd that you two men, with nearly the same experiences, should be neighbors."

"Say better and seller, ma'am, not neighbors—at least, scriptoorily—nor friends. Well—now this is where the speshal providence comes in—only this afternoon Jim Briggs, hearin' me speak of Horseley's offishness,——"

"Whose offishness?" asked the lady.

"Horseley's offishness—Horseley's the name of the man I'm talkin' about. Well, hearin' that, he says, 'You hold on, Hays, and he'll climb down. That wife of his has left the stage—got sick of it

"I SUPPOSE THIS IS MR. HAYS?"

—and is drifftin' round in 'Frisco with some fellow. When Horsely gets to hear that, you can't keep him here; he'll settle up, sell out, and realize on everything he's got to go after her again, you bet.' That's what Briggs said. Well, that's what sent me up to Horseley's to-night, to get there, drop the news, and then pin him down to the contract."

"It looked like a good stroke of business and a fair one," said the lady, in an odd voice. It was so odd that Hays looked up. But she had so newhat altered her position and was gazing at the ceiling, and with her hand to her face seemed to have just recovered from a slight yawn, at which he hesitated with a new and timid sense of politeness.

"You're getting tired, ma'am?"

"Oh, dear, no!" she said in the same voice, but clearing her throat with a little cough. "And why didn't you see this Mr. Horseley afterall? Oh, I forgot—you said you changed your mind from something you'd heard."

He had turned his eyes to the fire again, but without noticing as he did so that she slowly moved her face, still half hidden by her hand, toward him and was watching him intently.

"No," he said slowly, "nothin' I heard, somethin' I felt. It must hev been that that set me off the track. It kem to me all of a sudden that he might be sittin' thar calm and peaceful as I might be here, hevin' forgot all about her and his trouble, and here was me goin' to drop down upon him and start it all afresh again. It looked a little like persecution—yes, like persecution. I got rid of it, sayin' to myself it wasn't business. But I'd got off the road meantime, and had to find it again, and whenever I got back to the track and was pointed for his house, it all seemed to come back on me and set me off again. When that happened three times, I turned round and started for home."

"And do you mean to say," said the lady, with a discordant laugh, "that you believe, because you didn't go there and break the news, that nobody else will? That he won't hear of it from the first man he meets?"

"He don't meet any one up where he lives, and only Briggs and myself know it, and I'll see that Briggs don't tell. But it was mighty queer, this whole thing comin' upon me suddenly, wasn't it?"

"Very queer," replied the lady, "for," with the same metallic laugh, "you don't seem to be given to this kind of weakness with your own family."

If there were any doubtas to the sarcastic suggestion of her voice, there certainly could be none in the wicked glitter of her eyes fixed upon his face under her shading hand, but haply he seemed unconscious of both, and even accepted her statement without an ulterior significance.

"Yes," he said communingly to the glaring embers of the hearth, "it must have been a special revelation."

There was something so fatuous and one-sided in his attitude and expression, so monstrously inconsistent and inadequate to what was going on around him, and so hopelessly stupid—if a mere simpleton—that the angry suspicion that he was acting a part slowly faded from her eyes, and a hysterical smile began to twitch her set lips. She still gazed at him. The wind howled drearily in the chimney; all that was economic, grim and cheerless in the room seemed to gather as flitting shadows around that central figure. Suddenly she arose with such a quick rustling of her skirts that he lifted his eyes with a start; for she was standing immediately before him, her hands behind her, her handsome, audacious face bent smilingly forward, and her bold, brilliant eyes within a foot of his own.

"Now, Mr. Hays, do you want to know what this warning or special revelation of yours really meant? Well, it had nothing whatever to do with that man on the Summit. No. The whole interest and meaning of it was simply this, that you should turn round and come straight back here and"—she drew back and made him an exaggerated theatrical courtesy—"have the supreme pleasure of making my acquaintance. That was all. And now, as you've had it, to-morrow I must be off. You've offered me already your house and sleigh to go to the Summit. I accept it and so. Good-by!"

He knew nothing of a woman's capricious humor; he knew still less of that mimic stage from which her voice, gesture, and expression was borrowed; he had no knowledge of the burlesque emotions which that voice, gesture, and expression were supposed to portray, and finally and fatally he was unable to detect the feminine hysteric jar and discord that underlay it all. He thought it was strong, characteristic and real, and accepted it literally. He rose.

"If you allow you can't stay, why I'll go and get the horse. I reckon he ain't bin put up yet."

"No, please."

He grimly resumed his coat and hat and disappeared through the passage into the kitchen, whence, a moment latter, Zuleika came flying.

"Well, what has happened?" she said, eagerly.

"It's all right," said the woman, quickly, "though he knows nothing yet. But I've got things fixed generally, so that he'll be quite ready to have it broken to him by this time to-morrow. But don't you say anything till I've seen Jack and you hear from him. Remember."

She spoke rapidly; her cheeks were quite glowing from some sudden energy; so were Zuleika's with the excitement of curiosity. Presently the sound of sleigh bells again filled the room. It was Hays leading the horse and sleigh to the door, beneath a starlit sky, crisp from a northeast wind. The fair stranger cast a significant glance at Zuleika, and whispered hurriedly: "You know he must not come with me. You must keep him here."

"But you cannot go alone," said Hays, with awkward courtesy. "I was kalkliathn'——"

"You're too tired to get out again, dad," broke in Zuleika, quickly. "You ain't fit; you're all gray and krinkly now, like as when you had one of your last spells. She'll send the sleigh back to-morrow."

"I can find my way," said the lady, briskly; "there's only one turn off, I believe, and that——"

"Leads to the stage-station three miles west. You needn't be afraid of gettin' off on that, for you'll likely see the down-stage crossin' your road as soon as you get clear off the ranch."

"Good night," said the lady. An arc of white spray sprang before the forward runner, and the sleigh vanished in the road.

Father and daughter returned to the office.

"You didn't get to know her, dad, did ye?" queried Zuleika.

"No," responded Hays, gravely, "except to see she wasn't no backwoods or mountaineering sort. Now, there's the kind o' woman, as knows her own mind and yours, too, that a man like your brother Jack oughter pick out when he marries."

Zuleika's face beamed behind her father. "You ain't going to sit up any longer, dad?" she said, as she noticed him resume his seat by the fire. "It's gettin' late, and you look mighty tuckered out with your night's work."

"Do you know what she said, Zuly?" returned her father, after a pause, which turned out to have been a long silent laugh.

"No."

"She said," he repeated, slowly, "that she reckoned I came back here to-night to have the pleasure of her acquaintance." He brought his two hands heavily down upon his knees, rubbing them down deliberately toward his ankles, and leaning forward with his face to the fire and a long-sustained smile of complete though tardy appreciation.

He was still in this attitude when Zuleika left him. The wind crooned over him confidentially, but he still sat there, given up apparently to some posthumous enjoyment of his visitor's departing witticism.

It was scarcely daylight when Zuleika, while dressing, heard a quick tapping upon her shutter. She opened it to the scared and bewildered face of her brother.

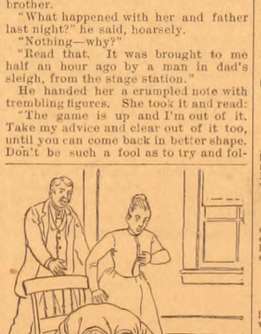
"What happened with her and father last night?" he said, hoarsely.

"Nothing—why?"

"Read that. It was brought to me half an hour ago by a man in dad's sleigh, from the stage station."

He handed her a crumpled note with trembling figures. She took it and read:

"The game is up and I'm out of it. Take my advice and clear out of it too, until you can come back in better shape. Don't be such a fool as to try and fol-



"HE HAD APPARENTLY SUNK FORWARD."

low me. Your father isn't one and that's where you've slipped up."

"He shall pay for it whatever he's done," said her brother with an access of wild passion. "Where is he?"

"Why, Jack, you wouldn't dare to see him now."

"Wouldn't I?"

He turned and ran, convulsed with passion, before the windows toward the front of the house. Zuleika slipped out of her bed-room and ran to her father's room. He was not there. Already she could hear her brother hammering frantically against the locked front door.

The door of the office was partly open. Her father was still there. Asleep? Yes, for he had apparently sank forward before the smouldering hearth. But the hands that he had always been trying to warm were now colder than the hearth or ashes, and he himself never again spoke, breathed, nor stirred.

* * * * *

It was deemed providential by the neighbors that this youngest and favorite son, alarmed by the news of his father's failing health, had arrived from the Atlantic States so opportunely. But it was thought singular that after the division of the property he entirely abandoned the ranch, and that even pending the division his beautiful but fastidious Eastern bride declined to visit it with her husband.

[THE END.]

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