

Homeward Bound eBook

Homeward Bound by James Fenimore Cooper

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HOMeward BOUND

Mr. Hatchard's conversation for nearly a week had been confined to fault-finding and grunts, a system of treatment designed to wean Mrs. Hatchard from her besetting sin of extravagance. On other occasions the treatment had, for short periods, proved successful, but it was quite evident that his wife's constitution was becoming inured to this physis and required a change of treatment. The evidence stared at him from the mantelpiece in the shape of a pair of huge pink vases, which had certainly not been there when he left in the morning. He looked at them and breathed heavily.

"Pretty, ain't they?" said his wife, nodding at them.

"Who gave 'em to you?" inquired Mr. Hatchard, sternly.

His wife shook her head. "You don't get vases like that given to you," she said, slowly. "Leastways, I don't."

"Do you mean to say you bought 'em?" demanded her husband.

Mrs. Hatchard nodded.

"After all I said to you about wasting my money?" persisted Mr. Hatchard, in amazed accents.

Mrs. Hatchard nodded, more brightly than before.

"There has got to be an end to this!" said her husband, desperately. "I won't have it! D'ye hear? I won't—have—it!"

"I bought 'em with my own money," said his wife, tossing her head.

"Your money?" said Mr. Hatchard. "To hear you talk anybody 'ud think you'd got three hundred a year, instead o' thirty. Your money ought to be spent in useful things, same as what mine is. Why should I spend my money keeping you, while you waste yours on pink vases and having friends in to tea?"

Mrs. Hatchard's still comely face took on a deeper tinge.

"Keeping me?" she said, sharply. "You'd better stop before you say anything you might be sorry for, Alfred."

"I should have to talk a long time before I said that," retorted the other.

"I'm not so sure," said his wife. "I'm beginning to be tired of it."

"I've reasoned with you," continued Mr. Hatchard, "I've argued with you, and I've pointed out the error of your ways to you, and it's all no good."

"Oh, be quiet, and don't talk nonsense," said his wife.

"Talking," continued Mr. Hatchard, "as I said before, is no good. Deeds, not words, is what is wanted."

He rose suddenly from his chair and, taking one of the vases from the mantelpiece, dashed it to pieces on the fender. Example is contagious, and two seconds later he was in his chair again, softly feeling a rapidly growing bump on his head, and gazing goggle-eyed at his wife.

[Illustration: Taking one of the vases from the mantelpiece, he dashed it to pieces on the fender.]

"And I'd do it again," said that lady, breathlessly, "if there was another vase."

Mr. Hatchard opened his mouth, but speech failed him. He got up and left the room without a word, and, making his way to the scullery, turned on the tap and held his head beneath it. A sharp intake of the breath announced that a tributary stream was looking for the bump down the neck of his shirt.

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He was away a long time—so long that the half-penitent Mrs. Hatchard was beginning to think of giving first aid to the wounded. Then she heard him coming slowly back along the passage. He entered the room, drying his wet hair on a hand-kerchief.

“I—I hope I didn’t hurt you—much?” said his wife.

Mr. Hatchard drew himself up and regarded her with lofty indignation.

“You might have killed me,” he said at last, in thrilling tones. “Then what would you have done?”

“Swept up the pieces, and said you came home injured and died in my arms,” said Mrs. Hatchard, glibly. “I don’t want to be unfeeling, but you’d try the temper of a saint. I’m sure I wonder I haven’t done it before. Why I married a stingy man I don’t know.”

“Why I married at all I don’t know,” said her husband, in a deep voice.

“We were both fools,” said Mrs. Hatchard, in a resigned voice; “that’s what it was. However, it can’t be helped now.”

“Some men would go and leave you,” said Mr. Hatchard.

“Well, go,” said his wife, bridling. “I don’t want you.”

“Don’t talk nonsense,” said the other.

“It ain’t nonsense,” said Mrs. Hatchard. “If you want to go, go. I don’t want to keep you.”

“I only wish I could,” said her husband, wistfully.

“There’s the door,” said Mrs. Hatchard, pointing. “What’s to prevent you?”

“And have you going to the magistrate?” observed Mr. Hatchard.

“Not me,” was the reply.

“Or coming up, full of complaints, to the ware-house?”

“Not me,” said his wife again.

“It makes my mouth water to think of it,” said Mr. Hatchard. “Four years ago I hadn’t a care in the world.”

“Me neither,” said Mrs. Hatchard; “but then I never thought I should marry you. I remember the first time I saw you I had to stuff my handkerchief in my mouth.”

“What for?” inquired Mr. Hatchard.

“Keep from laughing,” was the reply.

“You took care not to let me see you laugh,” said Mr. Hatchard, grimly. “You were polite enough in them days. I only wish I could have my time over again; that’s all.”

“You can go, as I said before,” said his wife.

“I’d go this minute,” said Mr. Hatchard, “but I know what it ’ud be: in three or four days you’d be coming and begging me to take you back again.”

“You try me,” said Mrs. Hatchard, with a hard laugh. “I can keep myself. You leave me the furniture—most of it is mine—and I sha’n’t worry you again.”

“Mind!” said Mr. Hatchard, raising his hand with great solemnity. “If I go, I never come back again.”

“I’ll take care of that,” said his wife, equably. “You are far more likely to ask to come back than I am.”

Mr. Hatchard stood for some time in deep thought, and then, spurred on by a short, contemptuous laugh from his wife, went to the small passage and, putting on his overcoat and hat, stood in the parlor doorway regarding her.

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"I've a good mind to take you at your word," he said, at last.

"Good-night," said his wife, briskly. "If you send me your address, I'll send your things on to you. There's no need for you to call about them."

Hardly realizing the seriousness of the step, Mr. Hatchard closed the front door behind him with a bang, and then discovered that it was raining. Too proud to return for his umbrella, he turned up his coat-collar and, thrusting his hands in his pockets, walked slowly down the desolate little street. By the time he had walked a dozen yards he began to think that he might as well have waited until the morning; before he had walked fifty he was certain of it.

He passed the night at a coffee-house, and rose so early in the morning that the proprietor took it as a personal affront, and advised him to get his breakfast elsewhere. It was the longest day in Mr. Hatchard's experience, and, securing modest lodgings that evening, he overslept himself and was late at the warehouse next morning for the first time in ten years.

His personal effects arrived next day, but no letter came from his wife, and one which he wrote concerning a pair of missing garments received no reply. He wrote again, referring to them in laudatory terms, and got a brief reply to the effect that they had been exchanged in part payment on a pair of valuable pink vases, the pieces of which he could have by paying the carriage.

In six weeks Mr. Hatchard changed his lodgings twice. A lack of those home comforts which he had taken as a matter of course during his married life was a source of much tribulation, and it was clear that his weekly bills were compiled by a clever writer of fiction. It was his first experience of lodgings, and the difficulty of saying unpleasant things to a woman other than his wife was not the least of his troubles. He changed his lodgings for a third time, and, much surprised at his wife's continued silence, sought out a cousin of hers named Joe Pett, and poured his troubles into that gentleman's reluctant ear.

"If she was to ask me to take her back," he concluded, "I'm not sure, mind you, that I wouldn't do so."

"It does you credit," said Mr. Pett. "Well, ta-ta; I must be off."

"And I expect she'd be very much obliged to anybody that told her so," said Mr. Hatchard, clutching at the other's sleeve.

Mr. Pett, gazing into space, said that he thought it highly probable.

"It wants to be done cleverly, though," said Mr. Hatchard, "else she might get the idea that I wanted to go back."

"I s'pose you know she's moved?" said Mr. Pett, with the air of a man anxious to change the conversation.

"Eh?" said the other.

"Number thirty-seven, John Street," said Mr. Pett. "Told my wife she's going to take in lodgers. Calling herself Mrs. Harris, after her maiden name."

He went off before Mr. Hatchard could recover, and the latter at once verified the information in part by walking round to his old house. Bits of straw and paper littered the front garden, the blinds were down, and a bill was pasted on the front parlor window. Aghast at such determination, he walked back to his lodgings in gloomy thought.

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On Saturday afternoon he walked round to John Street, and from the corner of his eye, as he passed, stole a glance at No. 37. He recognized the curtains at once, and, seeing that there was nobody in the room, leaned over the palings and peered at a card that stood on the window-sash:

*Furnished apartments
for single young man
Board if desired.*

He walked away whistling, and after going a little way turned and passed it again. He passed in all four times, and then, with an odd grin lurking at the corners of his mouth, strode up to the front door and knocked loudly. He heard somebody moving about inside, and, more with the idea of keeping his courage up than anything else, gave another heavy knock at the door. It was thrown open hastily, and the astonished face of his wife appeared before him.

“What do you want?” she inquired, sharply.

Mr. Hatchard raised his hat. “Good-afternoon, ma’am,” he said, politely.

“What do you want?” repeated his wife.

“I called,” said Mr. Hatchard, clearing his throat—“I called about the bill in the window.”

[Illustration: “I called about the bill in the window.”]

Mrs. Hatchard clutched at the door-post.

“Well?” she gasped.

“I’d like to see the rooms,” said the other.

“But you ain’t a single young man,” said his wife, recovering.

“I’m as good as single,” said Mr. Hatchard. “I should say, better.”

“You ain’t young,” objected Mrs. Hatchard. “I’m three years younger than what you are,” said Mr. Hatchard, dispassionately.

His wife’s lips tightened and her hand closed on the door; Mr. Hatchard put his foot in.

“If you don’t want lodgers, why do you put a bill up?” he inquired.

“I don’t take the first that comes,” said his wife.

"I'll pay a week in advance," said Mr. Hatchard, putting his hand in his pocket. "Of course, if you're afraid of having me here—afraid o' giving way to tenderness, I mean ____"

"Afraid?" choked Mrs. Hatchard. "Tenderness! I—I——"

"Just a matter o' business," continued her husband; "that's my way of looking at it—that's a man's way. I s'pose women are different. They can't——"

"Come in," said Mrs. Hatchard, breathing hard. Mr. Hatchard obeyed, and clapping a hand over his mouth ascended the stairs behind her. At the top she threw open the door of a tiny bedroom, and stood aside for him to enter. Mr. Hatchard sniffed critically.

"Smells rather stuffy," he said, at last.

"You needn't have it," said his wife, abruptly. "There's plenty of other fish in the sea."

"Yes; and I expect they'd stay there if they saw this room," said the other.

"Don't think I want you to have it; because I don't," said Mrs. Hatchard, making a preliminary movement to showing him downstairs.

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"They might suit me," said Mr. Hatchard, musingly, as he peeped in at the sitting-room door. "I shouldn't be at home much. I'm a man that's fond of spending his evenings out."

Mrs. Hatchard, checking a retort, eyed him grimly.

"I've seen worse," he said, slowly; "but then I've seen a good many. How much are you asking?"

"Seven shillings a week," replied his wife. "With breakfast, tea, and supper, a pound a week."

Mr. Hatchard nearly whistled, but checked himself just in time.

"I'll give it a trial," he said, with an air of unbearable patronage.

Mrs. Hatchard hesitated.

"If you come here, you quite understand it's on a business footing," she said.

"O' course," said the other, with affected surprise. "What do you think I want it on?"

"You come here as a stranger, and I look after you as a stranger," continued his wife.

"Certainly," said the other. "I shall be made more comfortable that way, I'm sure. But, of course, if you're afraid, as I said before, of giving way to tender——"

"Tender fiddlesticks!" interrupted his wife, flushing and eying him angrily.

"I'll come in and bring my things at nine o'clock to-night," said Mr. Hatchard. "I'd like the windows open and the rooms aired a bit. And what about the sheets?"

"What about them?" inquired his wife.

"Don't put me in damp sheets, that's all," said Mr. Hatchard. "One place I was at——"

He broke off suddenly.

"Well!" said his wife, quickly.

"Was very particular about them," said Mr. Hatchard, recovering. "Well, good-afternoon to you, ma'am."

"I want three weeks in advance," said his wife. "Three——" exclaimed the other. "Three weeks in advance? Why——"

“Those are my terms,” said Mrs. Hatchard. “Take ’em or leave ’em. P’r’aps it would be better if you left ’em.”

Mr. Hatchard looked thoughtful, and then with obvious reluctance took his purse from one pocket and some silver from another, and made up the required sum.

“And what if I’m not comfortable here?” he inquired, as his wife hastily pocketed the money. “It’ll be your own fault,” was the reply.

Mr. Hatchard looked dubious, and, in a thoughtful fashion, walked downstairs and let himself out. He began to think that the joke was of a more complicated nature than he had expected, and it was not without forebodings that he came back at nine o’clock that night accompanied by a boy with his baggage.

His gloom disappeared the moment the door opened. The air inside was warm and comfortable, and pervaded by an appetizing smell of cooked meats. Upstairs a small bright fire and a neatly laid supper-table awaited his arrival.

He sank into an easy-chair and rubbed his hands. Then his gaze fell on a small bell on the table, and opening the door he rang for supper.

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"Yes, sir," said Mrs. Hatchard, entering the room. "Supper, please," said the new lodger, with dignity.

Mrs. Hatchard looked bewildered. "Well, there it is," she said, indicating the table. "You don't want me to feed you, do you?"

The lodger eyed the small, dry piece of cheese, the bread and butter, and his face fell. "I—I thought I smelled something cooking," he said at last.

[Illustration: "I—I thought I smelled something cooking,' he said."]

"Oh, that was my supper," said Mrs. Hatchard, with a smile.

"I—I'm very hungry," said Mr. Hatchard, trying to keep his temper.

"It's the cold weather, I expect," said Mrs. Hatchard, thoughtfully; "it does affect some people that way, I know. Please ring if you want anything."

She left the room, humming blithely, and Mr. Hatchard, after sitting for some time in silent consternation, got up and ate his frugal meal. The fact that the water-jug held three pints and was filled to the brim gave him no satisfaction.

He was still hungry when he arose next morning, and, with curiosity tempered by uneasiness, waited for his breakfast. Mrs. Hatchard came in at last, and after polite inquiries as to how he had slept proceeded to lay breakfast. A fresh loaf and a large teapot appeared, and the smell of frizzling bacon ascended from below. Then Mrs. Hatchard came in again, and, smiling benevolently, placed an egg before him and withdrew. Two minutes later he rang the bell.

"You can clear away," he said, as Mrs. Hatchard entered the room.

"What, no breakfast?" she said, holding up her hands. "Well, I've heard of you single young men, but I never thought——"

"The tea's cold and as black as ink," growled the indignant lodger, "and the egg isn't eatable."

"I'm afraid you're a bit of a fault-finder," said Mrs. Hatchard, shaking her head at him. "I'm sure I try my best to please. I don't mind what I do, but if you're not satisfied you'd better go."

"Look here, Emily—" began her husband.

"Don't you 'Emily' me!" said Mrs. Hatchard, quickly. "The idea! A lodger, too! You know the arrangement. You'd better go, I think, if you can't behave yourself."



"I won't go till my three weeks are up," said Mr. Hatchard, doggedly, "so you may as well behave yourself."

"I can't pamper you for a pound a week," said Mrs. Hatchard, walking to the door. "If you want pampering, you had better go."

A week passed, and the additional expense caused by getting most of his meals out began to affect Mr. Hatchard's health. His wife, on the contrary, was in excellent spirits, and, coming in one day, explained the absence of the easy-chair by stating that it was wanted for a new lodger.

"He's taken my other two rooms," she said, smiling—"the little back parlor and the front bedroom—I'm full up now."

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"Wouldn't he like my table, too?" inquired Mr. Hatchard, with bitter sarcasm.

His wife said that she would inquire, and brought back word next day that Mr. Sadler, the new lodger, would like it. It disappeared during Mr. Hatchard's enforced absence at business, and a small bamboo table, weak in the joints, did duty in its stead.

The new lodger, a man of middle age with a ready tongue, was a success from the first, and it was only too evident that Mrs. Hatchard was trying her best to please him. Mr. Hatchard, supping on bread and cheese, more than once left that wholesome meal to lean over the balusters and smell the hot meats going into Mr. Sadler.

"You're spoiling him," he said to Mrs. Hatchard, after the new lodger had been there a week. "Mark my words—he'll get above himself."

"That's my look-out," said his wife briefly. "Don't come to me if you get into trouble, that's all," said the other.

Mrs. Hatchard laughed derisively. "You don't like him, that's what it is," she remarked. "He asked me yesterday whether he had offended you in any way."

"Oh! He did, did he?" snarled Mr. Hatchard. "Let him keep himself to himself, and mind his own business."

"He said he thinks you have got a bad temper," continued his wife. "He thinks, perhaps, it's indigestion, caused by eating cheese for supper always."

Mr. Hatchard affected not to hear, and, lighting his pipe, listened for some time to the hum of conversation between his wife and Mr. Sadler below. With an expression of resignation on his face that was almost saintly he knocked out his pipe at last and went to bed.

Half an hour passed, and he was still awake. His wife's voice had ceased, but the gruff tones of Mr. Sadler were still audible. Then he sat up in bed and listened, as a faint cry of alarm and the sound of somebody rushing upstairs fell on his ears. The next moment the door of his room burst open, and a wild figure, stumbling in the darkness, rushed over to the bed and clasped him in its arms.

"Help!" gasped his wife's voice. "Oh, Alfred! Alfred!"

"Ma'am!" said Mr. Hatchard in a prim voice, as he struggled in vain to free himself.

"I'm so—so—fr-frightened!" sobbed Mrs. Hatchard.

"That's no reason for coming into a lodger's room and throwing your arms round his neck," said her husband, severely.

“Don’t be stu-stu-stupid,” gasped Mrs. Hatchard. “He—he’s sitting downstairs in my room with a paper cap on his head and a fire-shovel in his hand, and he—he says he’s the—the Emperor of China.”

“He? Who?” inquired her husband.

“Mr. Sad-Sadler,” replied Mrs. Hatchard, almost strangling him. “He made me kneel in front o’ him and keep touching the floor with my head.”

The chair-bedstead shook in sympathy with Mr. Hatchard’s husbandly emotion.

“Well, it’s nothing to do with me,” he said at last.

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"He's mad," said his wife, in a tense whisper; "stark staring mad. He says I'm his favorite wife, and he made me stroke his forehead."

The bed shook again.

"I don't see that I have any right to interfere," said Mr. Hatchard, after he had quieted the bedstead. "He's your lodger."

"You're my husband," said Mrs. Hatchard. "Ho!" said Mr. Hatchard. "You've remembered that, have you?"

"Yes, Alfred," said his wife.

"And are you sorry for all your bad behavior?" demanded Mr. Hatchard.

Mrs. Hatchard hesitated. Then a clatter of fire-irons downstairs moved her to speech.

"Ye-yes," she sobbed.

"And you want me to take you back?" queried the generous Mr. Hatchard.

"Ye-ye-yes," said his wife.

Mr. Hatchard got out of bed and striking a match lit the candle, and, taking his overcoat from a peg behind the door, put it on and marched downstairs. Mrs. Hatchard, still trembling, followed behind.

"What's all this?" he demanded, throwing the door open with a flourish.

Mr. Sadler, still holding the fire-shovel sceptre-fashion and still with the paper cap on his head, opened his mouth to reply. Then, as he saw the unkempt figure of Mr. Hatchard with the scared face of Mrs. Hatchard peeping over his shoulder, his face grew red, his eyes watered, and his cheeks swelled.

"K-K-K-Kch! K-Kch!" he said, explosively. "Talk English, not Chinese," said Mr. Hatchard, sternly.

[Illustration: "'K-K-K-Kch! K-Kch!' he said, explosively."]

Mr. Sadler threw down the fire-shovel, and to Mr. Hatchard's great annoyance, clapped his open hand over his mouth and rocked with merriment.

"Sh—sh—she—she—" he spluttered.

"That'll do," said Mr. Hatchard, hastily, with a warning frown.

“Kow-towed to me,” gurgled Mr. Sadler. “You ought to have seen it, Alf. I shall never get over it—never. It’s—no—no good win-winking at me; I can’t help myself.”

He put his handkerchief to his eyes and leaned back exhausted. When he removed it, he found himself alone and everything still but for a murmur of voices overhead. Anon steps sounded on the stairs, and Mr. Hatchard, grave of face, entered the room.

“Outside!” he said, briefly.

“What!” said the astounded Mr. Sadler. “Why, it’s eleven o’clock.”

“I can’t help it if it’s twelve o’clock,” was the reply. “You shouldn’t play the fool and spoil things by laughing. Now, are you going, or have I got to put you out?”

He crossed the room and, putting his hand on the shoulder of the protesting Mr. Sadler, pushed him into the passage, and taking his coat from the peg held it up for him. Mr. Sadler, abandoning himself to his fate, got into it slowly and indulged in a few remarks on the subject of ingratitude.

“I can’t help it,” said his friend, in a low voice. “I’ve had to swear I’ve never seen you before.”

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“Does she believe you?” said the staring Mr. Sadler, shivering at the open door.

“No,” said Mr. Hatchard, slowly, “but she pre-tends to.”