

THE ARGONAUTS OF NORTH LIBERTY

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The Argonauts of North Liberty by Bret Harte

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BY

BRET HARTE



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PART I.

CHAPTER I.

THE bell of the North Liberty Second Presbyterian Church had just ceased ringing. North Liberty, Connecticut, never on any day a cheerful town, was always bleaker and more cheerless on the seventh, when the Sabbath sun, after vainly trying to coax a smile of reciprocal kindness from the drawn curtains and half closed shutters of the austere dwellings and the equally sealed and hard-set churchgoing faces of the people, at last settled down into a blank stare of stony astonishment. On this chilly March even-

ing of the year 1850, that stare had kindled into an offended sunset and an angry night that furiously spat sleet and hail in the faces of the worshippers, and made them fight their way to the church, step by step, with bent heads and fiercely compressed lips, until they seemed to be carrying its forbidding portals at the point of their umbrellas.

Within that sacred but graceless edifice, the rigors of the hour and occasion reached their climax. The shivering gas jets lit up the austere pallor of the bare walls, and the hollow, shell-like sweep of colorless vacuity behind the cold communion table. The chill of despair and hopeless renunciation was in the air, untempered by any glow from the sealed air-tight stove that seemed only to bring out a lukewarm exhalation of wet clothes and cheaply dyed umbrellas. Nor did the presence of the worshippers themselves impart any life to the dreary apartment. Scattered throughout the white pews, in dull, shapeless, neutral blotches, rigidly

separated from each other, they seemed only to accent the colorless church and the emptiness of all things. A few children, who had huddled together for warmth in one of the back benches and who had become glutinous and adherent through moisture, were laboriously drawn out and painfully picked apart by a watchful deacon.

The dry, monotonous disturbance of the bell had given way to the strain of a bass viol, that had been apparently pitched to the key of the east wind without, and the crude complaint of a new harmonium that seemed to bewail its limited prospect of ever becoming seasoned or mellowed in its earthly tabernacle, and then the singing began. Here and there a human voice soared and struggled above the narrow text and the monotonous cadence with a cry of individual longing, but was borne down by the dull, trampling precision of the others' formal chant. This and a certain muffled raking of the stove by the sexton brought the tem-

perature down still lower. A sermon, in keeping with the previous performance, in which the chill east wind of doctrine was not tempered to any shorn lamb within that dreary fold, followed. A spark of human and vulgar interest was momentarily kindled by the collection and the simultaneous movement of reluctant hands towards their owners' pockets; but the coins fell on the baize-covered plates with a dull thud, like clods on a coffin, and the dreariness returned. Then there was another hymn and a prolonged moan from the harmonium, to which mysterious suggestion the congregation rose and began slowly to file into the aisle. For a moment they mingled; there was the silent grasping of damp woollen mittens and cold black gloves, and the whispered interchange of each other's names with the prefix of "Brother" or "Sister," and an utter absence of fraternal geniality, and then the meeting slowly dispersed.

The few who had waited until the minister

had resumed his hat, overcoat, and overshoes, and accompanied him to the door, had already passed out; the sexton was turning out the flickering gas jets one by one, when the cold and austere silence was broken by a sound — the unmistakable echo of a kiss of human passion.

As the horror-stricken official turned angrily, the figure of a man glided from the shadow of the stairs below the organ loft, and vanished through the open door. Before the sexton could follow, the figure of a woman slipped out of the same portal, and with a hurried glance after the first retreating figure, turned in the opposite direction and was lost in the darkness. By the time the indignant and scandalized custodian had reached the portal, they had both melted in the troubled sea of tossing umbrellas already to the right and left of him, and pursuit and recognition were hopeless.