

BRET HARTE

THE ARGONAUTS OF
NORTH LIBERTY

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The Argonauts of North Liberty

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 kindliness 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 evening 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 temperature 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.

CHAPTER II

The male figure, however, after mingling with his fellow-worshippers to the corner of the block, stopped a moment under the lamp-post as if uncertain as to the turning, but really to cast a long, scrutinizing look towards the scattered umbrellas now almost lost in the opposite direction. He was still gazing and apparently hesitating whether to retrace his steps, when a horse and buggy rapidly driven down the side street passed him. In a brief glance he evidently recognized the driver, and stepping over the curbstone called in a brief authoritative voice:

“Ned!”

The occupant of the vehicle pulled up suddenly, leaned from the buggy, and said in an astonished tone:

“Dick Demorest! Well! I declare! hold on, and I’ll drive up to the curb.”

“No; stay where you are.”

The speaker approached the buggy, jumped in beside the occupant, refastened the apron, and coolly taking the reins from his companion’s hand, started the horse forward. The action was that of an habitually imperious man; and the only recognition he made of the other’s ownership was the question:

“Where were you going?”

“Home—to see Joan,” replied the other. “Just drove over from Warensboro Station. But what on earth are YOU doing here?”

Without answering the question, Demorest turned to his companion with the same good-natured, half humorous authority. “Let your wife wait; take a drive with me. I want to talk to you. She’ll be just as glad to see you an hour later, and it’s her fault if I can’t come home with you now.”

“I know it,” returned his companion, in a tone of half-annoyed apology. “She still sticks to her old compact when we first married, that she shouldn’t be obliged to receive my old worldly friends. And, see here, Dick, I thought I’d talked her out of it as regards YOU at least, but Parson Thomas has been raking up all the old stories about you—you know that affair of the Fall River widow, and that breaking off of Garry Spofforth’s match—and about your horse-racing—until—you know, she’s more set than ever against knowing you.”

“That’s not a bad sort of horse you’ve got there,” interrupted Demorest, who usually conducted conversation without reference to alien topics suggested by others. “Where did you get him? He’s good yet for a spin down the turnpike and over the bridge. We’ll do it, and I’ll bring you home safely to Mrs. Blandford inside the hour.”

Blandford knew little of horseflesh, but like all men he was not superior to this implied compliment to his knowledge. He resigned himself to his companion as he had been in the habit of doing, and Demorest hurried the horse at a rapid gait down the street until they left the lamps behind, and were fully on the dark turnpike. The sleet rattled against the hood and leathern apron of the buggy, gusts of fierce wind filled the vehicle and seemed to hold it back, but Demorest did not appear to mind it. Blandford thrust his hands deeply into his pockets for warmth, and contracted his shoulders as if in dogged patience. Yet, in spite of the fact that he was tired, cold, and anxious to see his wife, he was conscious of a secret satisfaction in submitting to the caprices of this old friend of his boyhood. After all, Dick Demorest knew what he was about, and had never led him astray by his autocratic will. It was safe to let Dick have his way. It was true it was generally Dick’s own way—but he made others think it was theirs too—or would have been theirs had they had the will and the knowledge to project it. He looked up comfortably at the handsome, resolute profile of the man who had taken selfish possession of him. Many women had done the same.

“Suppose if you were to tell your wife I was going to reform,” said Demorest, “it might be different, eh? She’d want to take me into the church—‘another sinner saved,’ and all that, eh?”

“No,” said Blandford, earnestly. “Joan isn’t as rigid as all that, Dick. What she’s got against you is the common report of your free way of living, and that—come now, you know yourself, Dick, that isn’t exactly the thing a woman brought up in her style can stand. Why, she thinks I’m unregenerate, and—well, a man can’t carry on business always like a class meeting. But are you thinking of reforming?” he continued, trying to get a glimpse of his companion’s eyes.

“Perhaps. It depends. Now—there’s a woman I know—”

“What, another? and you call this going to reform?” interrupted Blandford, yet not without a certain curiosity in his manner.

“Yes; that’s just why I think of reforming. For this one isn’t exactly like any other—at least as far as I know.”

“That means you don’t know anything about her.”

“Wait, and I’ll tell you.” He drew the reins tightly to accelerate the horse’s speed, and, half turning to his companion, without, however, moving his eyes from the darkness before him, spoke quickly between the blasts: “I’ve seen her only half a dozen times. Met her first in 6.40 train out from Boston last fall. She sat next to me. Covered up with wraps and veils; never looked twice at her. She spoke first—kind of half bold, half frightened way. Then got more comfortable and unwound herself, you know, and I saw she was young and not bad-looking. Thought she was some school-girl out for a lark—but rather new at it. Inexperienced, you know, but quite able to take care of herself, by George! and although she looked and acted as if she’d never spoken to a stranger all her life, didn’t mind the kind of stuff I talked to her. Rather encouraged it; and laughed—such a pretty little odd laugh, as if laughing wasn’t in her usual line, either, and she didn’t know how to manage it. Well, it ended in her slipping out at one end of the car when we arrived, while I was looking out for a cab for her at the other.” He stopped to recover from a stronger gust of wind. “I—I thought it a good joke on me, and let the thing drop out of my mind, although, mind you, she’d promised to meet me a month afterwards at the same time and place. Well, when the day came I happened to be in Boston, and went to the station. Don’t know why I went, for I didn’t for a moment think she’d keep her appointment. First, I couldn’t find her in the train, but after we’d started she came along out of some seat in the corner, prettier than ever, holding out her hand.” He drew a long inspiration. “You can bet your life, Ned, I didn’t let go that little hand the rest of the journey.”

His passion, or what passed for it, seemed to impart its warmth to the vehicle, and even stirred the chilled pulses of the man beside him.

“Well, who and what was she?”

“Didn’t find out; don’t know now. For the first thing she made me promise was not to follow her, nor to try to know her name. In return she said she would meet me again on another train near Hartford. She did—and again and again—but always on the train for about an hour, going or coming. Then she missed an appointment. I was regularly cut up, I tell you, and swore as she hadn’t kept her word, I wouldn’t keep mine, and began to hunt for her. In the midst of it I saw her accidentally; no matter where; I followed her to—well, that’s no matter to you, either. Enough that I saw her again—and, well, Ned, such is the influence of that girl over me that, by George! she made me make the same promise again!”

Blandford, a little disappointed at his friend’s dogmatic suppression of certain material facts, shrugged his shoulders.

“If that’s all your story,” he said, “I must say I see no prospect of your reforming. It’s the old thing over again, only this time you are evidently the victim. She’s some designing creature who will have you if she hasn’t already got you completely in her power.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about, Ned, and you’d better quit,” returned Demorest, with cheerful authoritativeness. “I tell you that that’s the sort of girl I’m going to marry, if I can, and settle down upon. You can make a memorandum of that, old man, if you like.”

“Then I don’t really see why you want to talk to ME about it. And if you are thinking that such a story would go down for a moment with Joan as an evidence of your reformation, you’re completely out, Dick. Was that your idea?”

“Yes—and I can tell you, you’re wrong again, Ned. You don’t know anything about women. You do just as I say—do you understand?—and don’t interfere with your own wrong-headed opinions of what other people will think, and I’ll take the risks of Mrs. Blandford giving me good advice. Your wife has got a heap more sense on these subjects than you have, you bet. You just tell her that I want to marry the girl and want her to help me—that I mean business, this time—and you’ll see how quick she’ll come down. That’s all I want of you. Will you or won’t you?”

With an outward expression of sceptical consideration and an inward suspicion of the peculiar force of this man’s dogmatic insight, Blandford assented, with, I fear, the mental reservation of telling the story to his wife in his own way. He was surprised when his friend suddenly drew the horse up sharply, and after a moment’s pause began to back him, cramp the wheels of the buggy and then skilfully, in the almost profound darkness, turn the vehicle and horse completely round to the opposite direction.

“Then you are not going over the bridge?” said Blandford.

Demorest made an imperative gesture of silence. The tumultuous rush and roar of swollen and rapid water came from the darkness behind them. “There’s been another break-out somewhere, and I reckon the bridge has got all it can do to-night to keep itself out of water without taking us over. At least, as I promised to set you down at your wife’s door inside of the hour, I don’t propose to try.” As the horse now travelled more easily with the wind behind him, Demorest, dismissing abruptly all other subjects, laid his hand with brusque familiarity on his companion’s knee, and as if the hour for social and confidential greeting had only just then arrived, said: “Well, Neddy, old boy, how are you getting on?”

“So, so,” said Blandford, dubiously. “You see,” he began, argumentatively, “in my business there’s a good deal of competition, and I was only saying this morning—”

But either Demorest was already familiar with his friend’s arguments, or had as usual exhausted his topic, for without paying the slightest attention to him, he again demanded abruptly, “Why don’t you go to California? Here everything’s played out. That’s the country for a young man like you—just starting into life, and without incumbrances. If I was free and fixed in my family affairs like you I’d go to-morrow.”

There was such an occult positivism in Demorest’s manner that for an instant Blandford, who had been married two years, and was transacting a steady and fairly profitable manufacturing business in the adjacent town, actually believed he was more fitted for adventurous speculation than the grimly erratic man of energetic impulses and pleasures beside him. He managed to stammer hesitatingly:

“But there’s Joan—she—”

“Nonsense! Let her stay with her mother; you sell out your interest in the business, put the money into an assorted cargo, and clap it and yourself into the first ship out of Boston—and there you are. You’ve been married going on two years now, and a little separation until you’ve built up a business out there, won’t do either of you any harm.”

Blandford, who was very much in love with his wife, was not, however, above putting the onus of embarrassing affection upon HER. “You don’t know, Joan, Dick,” he replied. “She’d never consent to a separation, even for a short time.”

“Try her. She’s a sensible woman—a deuced sight more than you are. You don’t understand women, Ned. That’s what’s the matter with you.”

It required all of Blandford’s fond memories of his wife’s conservative habits, Puritan practicality, religious domesticity, and strong family attachments, to withstand Demorest’s dogmatic convictions. He smiled, however, with a certain complacency, as he also recalled the previous autumn when the first news of the California gold discovery had penetrated North Liberty, and he had

expressed to her his belief that it would offer an outlet to Demorest's adventurous energy. She had received it with ill-disguised satisfaction, and the remark that if this exodus of Mammon cleared the community of the godless and unregenerate it would only be another proof of God's mysterious providence.

With the tumultuous wind at their backs it was not long before the buggy rattled once more over the cobble-stones of the town. Under the direction of his friend, Demorest, who still retained possession of the reins, drove briskly down a side street of more pretentious dwellings, where Blandford lived. One or two wayfarers looked up.

"Not so fast, Dick."

"Why? I want to bring you up to your door in style."

"Yes—but—it's Sunday. That's my house, the corner one."

They had stopped before a square, two-storied brick house, with an equally square wooden porch supported by two plain, rigid wooden columns, and a hollow sweep of dull concavity above the door, evidently of the same architectural order as the church. There was no corner or projection to break the force of the wind that swept its smooth glacial surface; there was no indication of light or warmth behind its six closed windows.

"There seems to be nobody at home," said Demorest, briefly. "Come along with me to the hotel."

"Joan sits in the back parlor, Sundays," explained the husband.

"Shall I drive round to the barn and leave the horse and buggy there while you go in?" continued Demorest, good-humoredly, pointing to the stable gate at the side.

"No, thank you," returned Blandford, "it's locked, and I'll have to open it from the other side after I go in. The horse will stand until then. I think I'll have to say good-night, now," he added, with a sudden half-ashamed consciousness of the forbidding aspect of the house, and his own inhospitality. "I'm sorry I can't ask you in—but you understand why."

"All right," returned Demorest, stoutly, turning up his coat-collar, and unfurling his umbrella. "The hotel is only four blocks away—you'll find me there to-morrow morning if you call. But mind you tell your wife just what I told you—and no meandering of your own—you hear! She'll strike out some idea with her woman's wits, you bet. Good-night, old man!" He reached out his hand, pressed Blandford's strongly and potentially, and strode down the street.

Blandford hitched his steaming horse to a sleet-covered horse block with a quick sigh of impatient sympathy over the animal and himself, and after fumbling in his pocket for a latchkey, opened the front door. A vista of well-ordered obscurity with shadowy trestle-like objects against the walls, and an odor of chill decorum, as if of a damp but respectable funeral, greeted him on entering. A faint light, like a cold dawn, broke through the glass pane of a door leading to the kitchen. Blandford paused in the mid-darkness and hesitated. Should he first go to his wife in the back parlor, or pass silently through the kitchen, open the back gate, and mercifully bestow his sweating beast in the stable? With the reflection that an immediate conjugal greeting, while his horse was still exposed to the fury of the blast in the street, would necessarily be curtailed and limited, he compromised by quickly passing through the kitchen into the stable yard, opening the gate, and driving horse and vehicle under the shed to await later and more thorough ministrations. As he entered the back door, a faint hope that his wife might have heard him and would be waiting for him in the hall for an instant thrilled him; but he remembered it was Sunday, and that she was probably engaged in some devotional reading or exercise. He hesitatingly opened the back-parlor door with a consciousness of committing some unreasonable trespass, and entered.

She was there, sitting quietly before a large, round, shining centre-table, whose sterile emptiness was relieved only by a shaded lamp and a large black and gilt open volume. A single picture on the opposite wall—the portrait of an elderly gentleman stiffened over a corresponding volume, which he held in invincible mortmain in his rigid hand, and apparently defied posterity to take from him

—seemed to offer a not uncongenial companionship. Yet the greenish light of the shade fell upon a young and pretty face, despite the color it extracted from it, and the hand that supported her low white forehead over which her full hair was simply parted, like a brown curtain, was slim and gentlewomanly. In spite of her plain lustreless silk dress, in spite of the formal frame of sombre heavy horsehair and mahogany furniture that seemed to set her off, she diffused an atmosphere of cleanly grace and prim refinement through the apartment. The priestess of this ascetic temple, the femininity of her closely covered arms, her pink ears, and a little serviceable morocco house-shoe that was visible lower down, resting on the carved lion's paw that upheld the centre-table, appeared to be only the more accented. And the precisely rounded but softly heaving bosom, that was pressed upon the edges of the open book of sermons before her, seemed to assert itself triumphantly over the rigors of the volume.

At least so her husband and lover thought, as he moved tenderly towards her. She met his first kiss on her forehead; the second, a supererogatory one, based on some supposed inefficiency in the first, fell upon a shining band of her hair, beside her neck. She reached up her slim hands, caught his wrists firmly, and, slightly putting him aside, said:

“There, Edward?”

“I drove out from Warensboro, so as to get here to-night, as I have to return to the city on Tuesday. I thought it would give me a little more time with you, Joan,” he said, looking around him, and, at last, hesitatingly drawing an apparently reluctant chair from its formal position at the window. The remembrance that he had ever dared to occupy the same chair with her, now seemed hardly possible of credence.

“If it was a question of your travelling on the Lord's Day, Edward, I would rather you should have waited until to-morrow,” she said, with slow precision.

“But—I—I thought I'd get here in time for the meeting,” he said, weakly.

“And instead, you have driven through the town, I suppose, where everybody will see you and talk about it. But,” she added, raising her dark eyes suddenly to his, “where else have you been? The train gets into Warensboro at six, and it's only half an hour's drive from there. What have you been doing, Edward?”

It was scarcely a felicitous moment for the introduction of Demorest's name, and he would have avoided it. But he reflected that he had been seen, and he was naturally truthful. “I met Dick Demorest near the church, and as he had something to tell me, we drove down the turnpike a little way—so as to be out of the town, you know, Joan—and—and—”

He stopped. Her face had taken upon itself that appalling and exasperating calmness of very good people who never get angry, but drive others to frenzy by the simple occlusion of an adamant veil between their own feelings and their opponents'. “I'll tell you all about it after I've put up the horse,” he said hurriedly, glad to escape until the veil was lifted again. “I suppose the hired man is out.”

“I should hope he was in church, Edward, but I trust YOU won't delay taking care of that poor dumb brute who has been obliged to minister to your and Mr. Demorest's Sabbath pleasures.”

Blandford did not wait for a further suggestion. When the door had closed behind him, Mrs. Blandford went to the mantel-shelf, where a grimly allegorical clock cut down the hours and minutes of men with a scythe, and consulted it with a slight knitting of her pretty eyebrows. Then she fell into a vague abstraction, standing before the open book on the centre-table. Then she closed it with a snap, and methodically putting it exactly in the middle of the top of a black cabinet in the corner, lifted the shaded lamp in her hand and passed slowly with it up the stairs to her bedroom, where her light steps were heard moving to and fro. In a few moments she reappeared, stopping for a moment in the hall with the lighted lamp as if to watch and listen for her husband's return. Seen in that favorable light, her cheeks had caught a delicate color, and her dark eyes shone softly. Putting the lamp down in exactly the same place as before, she returned to the cabinet for the book, brought it again to the table, opened it at the page where she had placed her perforated cardboard book-marker, sat down beside

it, and with her hands in her lap and her eyes on the page began abstractedly to tear a small piece of paper into tiny fragments. When she had reduced it to the smallest shreds, she scraped the pieces out of her silk lap and again collected them in the pink hollow of her little hand, kneeling down on the scrupulously well-swept carpet to peck up with a bird-like action of her thumb and forefinger an escaped atom here and there. These and the contents of her hand she poured into the chilly cavity of a sepulchral-looking alabaster vase that stood on the etagere. Returning to her old seat, and making a nest for her clasped fingers in the lap of her dress, she remained in that attitude, her shoulders a little narrowed and bent forward, until her husband returned.

"I've lit the fire in the bedroom for you to change your clothes by," she said, as he entered; then evading the caress which this wifely attention provoked, by bending still more primly over her book, she added, "Go at once. You're making everything quite damp here."

He returned in a few moments in his slippers and jacket, but evidently found the same difficulty in securing a conjugal and confidential contiguity to his wife. There was no apparent social centre or nucleus of comfort in the apartment; its fireplace, sealed by an iron ornament like a monumental tablet over dead ashes, had its functions superseded by an air-tight drum in the corner, warmed at second-hand from the dining-room below, and offered no attractive seclusion; the sofa against the wall was immovable and formally repellent. He was obliged to draw a chair beside the table, whose every curve seemed to facilitate his wife's easy withdrawal from side-by-side familiarity.

"Demorest has been urging me very strongly to go to California, but, of course, I spoke of you," he said, stealing his hand into his wife's lap, and possessing himself of her fingers.

Mrs. Blandford slowly lifted her fingers enclosed in his clasping hand and placed them in shameless publicity on the volume before her. This implied desecration was too much for Blandford; he withdrew his hand.

"Does that man propose to go with you?" asked Mrs. Blandford, coldly.

"No; he's preoccupied with other matters that he wanted me to talk to you about," said her husband, hesitatingly. "He is—"

"Because"—continued Mrs. Blandford in the same measured tone, "if he does not add his own evil company to his advice, it is the best he has ever given yet. I think he might have taken another day than the Lord's to talk about it, but we must not despise the means nor the hour whence the truth comes. Father wanted me to take some reasonable moment to prepare you to consider it seriously, and I thought of talking to you about it to-morrow. He thinks it would be a very judicious plan. Even Deacon Truesdail—"

"Having sold his invoice of damaged sugar kettles for mining purposes, is converted," said Blandford, goaded into momentary testiness by his wife's unexpected acquiescence and a sudden recollection of Demorest's prophecy. "You have changed your opinion, Joan, since last fall, when you couldn't bear to think of my leaving you," he added reproachfully.

"I couldn't bear to think of your joining the mob of lawless and sinful men who use that as an excuse for leaving their wives and families. As for my own feelings, Edward, I have never allowed them to stand between me and what I believed best for our home and your Christian welfare. Though I have no cause to admire the influence that I find this man, Demorest, still holds over you, I am willing to acquiesce, as you see, in what he advises for your good. You can hardly reproach ME, Edward, for worldly or selfish motives."

Blandford felt keenly the bitter truth of his wife's speech. For the moment he would gladly have exchanged it for a more illogical and selfish affection, but he reflected that he had married this religious girl for the security of an affection which he felt was not subject to the temptations of the world—or even its own weakness—as was too often the case with the giddy maidens whom he had known through Demorest's companionship. It was, therefore, more with a sense of recalling this distinctive quality of his wife than any loyalty to Demorest that he suddenly resolved to confide to her the latter's fatuous folly.

“I know it, dear,” he said, apologetically, “and we’ll talk it over to-morrow, and it may be possible to arrange it so that you shall go with me. But, speaking of Demorest, I think you don’t quite do HIM justice. He really respects YOUR feelings and your knowledge of right and wrong more than you imagine. I actually believe he came here to-night merely to get me to interest you in an extraordinary love affair of his. I mean, Joan,” he added hastily, seeing the same look of dull repression come over her face, “I mean, Joan—that is, you know, from all I can judge—it is something really serious this time. He intends to reform. And this is because he has become violently smitten with a young woman whom he has only seen half a dozen times, at long intervals, whom he first met in a railway train, and whose name and residence he don’t even know.”

There was an ominous silence—so hushed that the ticking of the allegorical clock came like a grim monitor. “Then,” said Mrs. Blandford, in a hard, dry voice that her alarmed husband scarcely recognized, “he proposed to insult your wife by taking her into his shameful confidence.”

“Good heavens! Joan, no—you don’t understand. At the worst, this is some virtuous but silly school-girl, who, though she may be intending only an innocent flirtation with him, has made this man actually and deeply in love with her. Yes; it is a fact, Joan. I know Dick Demorest, and if ever there was a man honestly in love, it is he.”

“Then you mean to say that this man—an utter stranger to me—a man whom I’ve never laid my eyes on—whom I wouldn’t know if I met in the street—expects me to advise him—to—to—” She stopped. Blandford could scarcely believe his senses. There were tears in her eyes—this woman who never cried; her voice trembled—she who had always controlled her emotions.

He took advantage of this odd but opportune melting. He placed his arm around her shoulders. She tried to escape it, but with a coy, shy movement, half hysterical, half girlish, unlike her usual stony, moral precision. “Yes, Joan,” he repeated, laughingly, “but whose fault is it? Not HIS, remember! And I firmly believe he thinks you can do him good.”

“But he has never seen me,” she continued, with a nervous little laugh, “and probably considers me some old Gorgon—like—like—Sister Jemima Skerret.”

Blandford smiled with the complacency of far-reaching masculine intuition. Ah! that shrewd fellow, Demorest, was right. Joan, dear Joan, was only a woman after all.

“Then he’ll be the more agreeably astonished,” he returned, gayly, “and I think YOU will, too, Joan. For Dick isn’t a bad-looking fellow; most women like him. It’s true,” he continued, much amused at the novelty of the perfectly natural toss and grimace with which Mrs. Blandford received this statement.

“I think he’s been pointed out to me somewhere,” she said, thoughtfully; “he’s a tall, dark, dissipated-looking man.”

“Nothing of the kind,” laughed her husband. “He’s middle-sized and as blond as your cousin Joe, only he’s got a long yellow moustache, and has a quick, abrupt way of talking. He isn’t at all fancy-looking; you’d take him for an energetic business man or a doctor, if you didn’t know him. So you see, Joan, this correct little wife of mine has been a little, just a little, prejudiced.”

He drew her again gently backwards and nearer his seat, but she caught his wrists in her slim hands, and rising from the chair at the same moment, dexterously slipped from his embrace with her back towards him. “I do not know why I should be unprejudiced by anything you’ve told me,” she said, sharply closing the book of sermons, and, with her back still to her husband, reinstating it formally in its place on the cabinet. “It’s probably one of his many scandalous pursuits of defenceless and believing women, and he, no doubt, goes off to Boston, laughing at you for thinking him in earnest; and as ready to tell his story to anybody else and boast of his double deceit.” Her voice had a touch of human asperity in it now, which he had never before noticed, but recognizing, as he thought, the human cause, it was far from exciting his displeasure.

“Wrong again, Joan; he’s waiting here at the Independence House for me to see him to-morrow,” he returned, cheerfully. “And I believe him so much in earnest that I would be ready to

swear that not another person will ever know the story but you and I and he. No, it is a real thing with him; he's dead in love, and it's your duty as a Christian to help him."

There was a moment of silence. Mrs. Blandford remained by the cabinet, methodically arranging some small articles displaced by the return of the book. "Well," she said, suddenly, "you don't tell me what mother had to say. Of course, as you came home earlier than you expected, you had time to stop THERE—only four doors from this house."

"Well, no, Joan," replied Blandford, in awkward discomfiture. "You see I met Dick first, and then—then I hurried here to you—and—and—I clean forgot it. I'm very sorry," he added, dejectedly.

"And I more deeply so," she returned, with her previous bloodless moral precision, "for she probably knows by this time, Edward, why you have omitted your usual Sabbath visit, and with WHOM you were."

"But I can pull on my boots again and run in there for a moment," he suggested, dubiously, "if you think it necessary. It won't take me a moment."

"No," she said, positively; "it is so late now that your visit would only show it to be a second thought. I will go myself—it will be a call for us both."

"But shall I go with you to the door? It is dark and sleeting," suggested Blandford, eagerly.

"No," she replied, peremptorily. "Stay where you are, and when Ezekiel and Bridget come in send them to bed, for I have made everything fast in the kitchen. Don't wait up for me."

She left the room, and in a few moments returned, wrapped from head to foot in an enormous plaid shawl. A white woollen scarf thrown over her bare brown head, and twice rolled around her neck, almost concealed her face from view. When she had parted from her husband, and reached the darkened hall below, she drew from beneath the folds of her shawl a thick blue veil, with which she completely enveloped her features. As she opened the front door and peered out into the night, her own husband would have scarcely recognized her.

With her head lowered against the keen wind she walked rapidly down the street and stopped for an instant at the door of the fourth house. Glancing quickly back at the house she had left and then at the closed windows of the one she had halted before, she gathered her skirts with one hand and sped away from both, never stopping until she reached the door of the Independence Hotel.

CHAPTER III

Mrs. Blandford entered the side door boldly. Luckily for her, the austerities of the Sabbath were manifest even here; the bar-room was closed, and the usual loungers in the passages were absent. Without risking the recognition of her voice in an inquiry to the clerk, she slipped past the office, still muffled in her veil, and quickly mounted the narrow staircase. For an instant she hesitated before the public parlor, and glanced dubiously along the half-lit corridor. Chance befriended her; the door of a bedroom opened at that moment, and Richard Demorest, with his overcoat and hat on, stepped out in the hall.

With a quick and nervous gesture of her hand she beckoned him to approach. He came towards her leisurely, with an amused curiosity that suddenly changed to utter astonishment as she hurriedly lifted her veil, dropped it, turned, and glided down the staircase into the street again. He followed rapidly, but did not overtake her until she had reached the corner, when she slackened her pace an instant for him to join her.

“Lulu,” he said eagerly; “is it you?”

“Not a word here,” she said, breathlessly. “Follow me at a distance.”

She started forward again in the direction of her own house. He followed her at a sufficient interval to keep her faintly distinguishable figure in sight until she had crossed three streets, and near the end of the next block glided up the steps of a house not far from the one where he remembered to have left Blandford. As he joined her, she had just succeeded in opening the door with a pass-key, and was awaiting him. With a gesture of silence she took his hand in her cold fingers, and leading him softly through the dark hall and passage, quickly entered the kitchen. Here she lit a candle, turned, and faced him. He could see that the outside shutters were bolted, and the kitchen evidently closed for the night.

As she removed the veil from her face he made a movement as if to regain her hand again, but she drew it away.

“You have forced this upon me,” she said hurriedly, “and it may be ruin to us both. Why have you betrayed me?”

“Betrayed you, Lulu—Good God! what do you mean?”

She looked him full in the eye, and then said slowly, “Do you mean to say that you have told no one of our meetings?”

“Only one—my old friend Blandford, who lives—Ah, yes! I see it now. You are neighbors. He has betrayed me. This house is—”

“My father’s!” she replied boldly.

The momentary uneasiness passed from Demorest’s resolute face. His old self-sufficiency returned. “Good,” he said, with a frank laugh, “that will do for me. Open the door there, Lulu, and take me to him. I’m not ashamed of anything I’ve done, my girl, nor need you be. I’ll tell him my real name is Dick Demorest, as I ought to have told you before, and that I want to marry you, fairly and squarely, and let him make the conditions. I’m not a vagabond nor a thief, Lulu, if I have met you on the sly. Come, dear, let us end this now. Come—”

But she had thrown herself before him and placed her hand upon his lips. “Hush! are you mad? Listen to me, I tell you—please—oh, do—no you must not!” He had covered her hand with kisses and was drawing her face towards his own. “No—not again, it was wrong then, it is monstrous now. I implore you, listen, if you love me, stop.”

He released her. She sank into a chair by the kitchen-table, and buried her flushed face in her hands.

He stood for a moment motionless before her. “Lulu, if that is your name,” he said slowly, but gently, “tell me all now. Be frank with me, and trust me. If there is anything stands in the way, let me

know what it is and I can overcome it. If it is my telling Ned Blandford, don't let that worry you, he's as loyal a fellow as ever breathed, and I'm a dog to ever think he willingly betrayed us. His wife, well, she's one of those pious saints—but no, she would not be such a cursed hypocrite and bigot as this.”

“Hush, I tell you! WILL you hush,” she said, in a frantic whisper, springing to her feet and grasping him convulsively by the lapels of his overcoat. “Not a word more, or I'll kill myself. Listen! Do you know what I brought you here for? why I left my—this house and dragged you out of your hotel? Well, it was to tell you that you must leave me, leave HERE—go out of this house and out of this town at once, to-night! And never look on it or me again! There! you have said we must end this now. It is ended, as only it could and ever would end. And if you open that door except to go, or if you attempt to—to touch me again, I'll do something desperate. There!”

She threw him off again and stepped back, strangely beautiful in the loosened shackles of her long repressed human emotion. It was as if the passion-rent robes of the priestess had laid bare the flesh of the woman dazzling and victorious. Demorest was fascinated and frightened.

“Then you do not love me?” he said with a constrained smile, “and I am a fool?”

“Love you!” she repeated. “Love you,” she continued, bowing her brown head over her hanging arms and clasped hands. “What then has brought me to this? Oh,” she said suddenly, again seizing him by his two arms, and holding him from her with a half-prudish, half-passionate gesture, “why could you not have left things as they were; why could we not have met in the same old way we used to meet, when I was so foolish and so happy? Why could you spoil that one dream I have clung to? Why didn't you leave me those few days of my wretched life when I was weak, silly, vain, but not the unhappy woman I am now. You were satisfied to sit beside me and talk to me then. You respected my secret, my reserve. My God! I used to think you loved me as I loved you—for THAT! Why did you break your promise and follow me here? I believed you the first day we met, when you said there was no wrong in my listening to you; that it should go no further; that you would never seek to renew it without my consent. You tell me I don't love you, and I tell you now that we must part, that frightened as I was, foolish as I was, that day was the first day I had ever lived and felt as other women live and feel. If I ran away from you then it was because I was running away from my old self too. Don't you understand me? Could you not have trusted me as I trusted you?”

“I broke my promise only when you broke yours. When you would not meet me I followed you here, because I loved you.”

“And that is why you must leave me now,” she said, starting from his outstretched arms again. “Do not ask me why, but go, I implore you. You must leave this town to-night, to-morrow will be too late.”

He cast a hurried glance around him, as if seeking to gather some reason for this mysterious haste, or a clue for future identification. He saw only the Sabbath-sealed cupboards, the cold white china on the dresser, and the flicker of the candle on the partly-opened glass transom above the door. “As you wish,” he said, with quiet sadness. “I will go now, and leave the town to-night; but”—his voice struck its old imperative note—“this shall not end here, Lulu. There will be a next time, and I am bound to win you yet, in spite of all and everything.”

She looked at him with a half-frightened, half-hysterical light in her eyes. “God knows!”

“And you will be frank with me then, and tell me all?”

“Yes, yes, another time; but go now.” She had extinguished the candle, turned the handle of the door noiselessly, and was holding it open. A faint light stole through the dark passage. She drew back hastily. “You have left the front door open,” she said in a frightened voice. “I thought you had shut it behind me,” he returned quickly. “Good night.” He drew her towards him. She resisted slightly. They were for an instant clasped in a passionate embrace; then there was a sudden collapse of the light and a dull jar. The front door had swung to.

With a desperate bound she darted into the passage and through the hall, dragging him by the hand, and threw the front door open. Without, the street was silent and empty.

“Go,” she whispered frantically.

Demorest passed quickly down the steps and disappeared. At the same moment a voice came from the banisters of the landing above. “Who’s there?”

“It’s I, mother.”

“I thought so. And it’s like Edward to bring you and sneak off in that fashion.”

Mrs. Blandford gave a quick sigh of relief. Demorest’s flight had been mistaken for her husband’s habitual evasion. Knowing that her mother would not refer to the subject again, she did not reply, but slowly mounted the dark staircase with an assumption of more than usual hesitating precaution, in order to recover her equanimity.

The clocks were striking eleven when she left her mother’s house and re-entered her own. She was surprised to find a light burning in the kitchen, and Ezekiel, their hired man, awaiting her in a dominant and nasal key of religious and practical disapprobation. “Pity you wern’t tu hum afore, ma’am, considerin’ the doins that’s goin’ on in perfessed Christians’ houses arter meetin’ on the Sabbath Day.”

“What’s the difficulty now, Ezekiel?” said Mrs. Blandford, who had regained her rigorous precision once more under the decorous security of her own roof.

“Wa’al, here comes an entire stranger axin for Squire Blandford. And when I tells he warn’t tu hum—”

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