

## After the Storm

### The War of the Elements

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#### Chapter 1

No June day ever opened with a fairer promise. Not a single *cloud* flecked the sky, and the sun coursed onward through the *azure sea* until past meridian, without throwing to the earth a single shadow. Then, low in the west, appeared something obscure and hazy, blending the hill-tops with the horizon. An hour later, three or four *small fleecy islands* were seen, clearly outlined in the airy ocean, and slowly ascending — *couriers of a coming storm*.

Following these were mountain peaks, snow-capped and craggy, with desolate valleys between. Then, over all this arctic panorama, fell a sudden shadow. The white tops of the cloudy hills lost their clear, gleaming outlines and their slumbrous stillness. The atmosphere was in motion, and a white cloud began to drive across the heavy, dark masses of clouds that lay far back against the sky in mountain-like repose.

How grandly now began the onward march of the *tempest*, which had already invaded the sun's domain and shrouded his face in the smoke of approaching battle. Dark and heavy it lay along more than half the visible horizon — while its crown invaded the zenith.

As yet, all was silence and portentous gloom. Nature seemed to pause and hold her breath in dread anticipation. Then came a muffled, jarring sound, as of far distant artillery, which died away into an oppressive stillness. Suddenly from zenith to horizon, the cloud was cut by a *fiery stroke*, an instant visible. Following this, a heavy *thunder-peal* shook the solid earth, and rattled in booming echoes along the hillsides and amid the cloudy caverns above.

At last, the *storm* came down on the wind's strong pinions, swooping fiercely to the earth, like an eagle to its prey. For one wild hour, it raged as if the *angel of destruction* were abroad.

At the window of a house standing picturesquely among the Hudson Highlands, and looking down upon the river, stood a *maiden* and her *lover*, gazing upon this

wild war among the elements. *Fear* had pressed her closely to his side, and he had drawn an arm around her in assurance of safety.

Suddenly the maiden clasped her hands over her face, cried out and shuddered. The lightning had shivered a tree upon which her gaze was fixed, rending it as she could have rent a sheet of paper!

"*God is in the storm,*" said the lover, bending to her ear. He spoke reverently and in a voice that had in it no tremor of fear.

The maiden withdrew her hands from before her shut eyes, and looking up into his face, answered in a voice which she strove to make steady:

"Thank you, *Hartley*, for the words. Yes, God is present in the *storm* — as in the *sunshine.*"

"*Look!*" exclaimed the young man, suddenly, pointing to the river. A *boat* had just come in sight. It contained a man and a woman. The former was striving with a pair of oars to keep the boat right in the eye of the wind; but while the maiden and her lover still gazed at them, a wild gust swept down upon the water and drove their frail bark under! There was no hope in their case; the *floods* had swallowed them, and would not give up their *living prey*.

A moment afterward, and an elm, whose great arms had for nearly a century spread themselves out in the sunshine tranquilly or battled with the storms — fell crashing against the house, shaking it to the very foundations.

The maiden drew back from the window, overcome with terror! These shocks were too much for her nerves. But her lover restrained her, saying, with a concealed chiding in his voice,

"Stay, Irene! There is a *wild delight* in all this, and are you not brave enough to share it with me?"

But she struggled to release herself from his arm, replying with a shade of impatience —

"*Let me go, Hartley! Let me go!*"

The flexed arm was instantly relaxed, and the maiden was free. She went back, hastily, from the window, and, sitting down on a sofa, buried her face in her hands. The young man did not follow her, but remained standing by the window, gazing out upon *Nature* in her strong convulsion. It may, however, be doubted whether his *mind* took note of the wild images that were pictured in his eyes. A cloud was in the horizon of his mind, dimming its heavenly azure. And the maiden's sky was shadowed also.

For two or three minutes the young man stood by the window, looking out at the *writhing trees* and the rain pouring down an avalanche of water, and then, with a movement that indicated a struggle and a conquest, turned and walked toward the sofa on which the maiden still sat with her face hidden from view. Sitting down beside her, he took her hand. It lay passive in his. He pressed it gently; but she gave back no returning pressure. There came a sharp, quick gleam of lightning, followed by a *crash* that jarred the house. But Irene did not startle — we may question whether she even saw the one, or heard the other, except as something remote.

"Irene!"

She did not stir.

The young man leaned closer, and said, in a tender voice —

"Irene — darling — "

Her hand moved in his — just moved — but did not return the pressure of his own.

"Irene." And now his arm stole around her. She yielded, and, turning, laid her head upon his shoulder.

There had been a *little storm in the maiden's heart*, resulting upon the slight restraint ventured on her by her lover when she drew back from the window; and it was only now subsiding.

"I did not mean to offend you," said the young man, penitently.

"Who said that I was offended?" She looked up, with a smile that only half obliterated the shadow. "I was *frightened*, Hartley. It is a fearful storm!" And she glanced toward the window.

The lover accepted this affirmation, though he knew better in his heart. He knew that his slight attempt at constraint, had *chafed* her naturally impatient spirit, and that it had taken her some time to regain her lost self-control.

Without, the wild rush of winds was subsiding, the *lightning* gleamed out less frequently, and the *thunder* rolled at a farther distance. Then came that deep stillness of nature which follows in the wake of the tempest, and in its hush, the lovers stood again at the window, looking out upon the *wrecks* that were strewn in its path. They were silent, for on both hearts was a *shadow*, which had not rested there when they first stood by the window, although the sky was then more deeply veiled. So slight was the *cause* on which these shadows depended,

that memory scarcely retained its impression. He was tender — and she was yielding; and each tried to atone by loving acts for a moment of willfulness.

The sun went down while yet the skirts of the storm were spread over the western sky — and without a single glance at the ruins which lightning, wind and rain had scattered over the earth's fair surface. But he arose gloriously in the coming morning, and went upward in his strength, consuming the vapors at a breath, and drinking up every bright dewdrop that welcomed him with a quiver of joy. The branches shook themselves in the gentle breezes his presence had called forth, to dally amid their foliage and sport with the flowers; and every green thing put on a fresher beauty in delight at his return; while from the bosom of the trees — from hedgerow and from meadow — went up the melody of birds.

In the brightness of this morning, the lovers went out to look at the *storm-wrecks* that lay scattered around. Here, a tree had been twisted off, where the tough wood measured by feet, instead of inches. There, stood the white and shivered trunk of another *sylvan lord*, blasted in an instant by a lightning stroke. And there lay, prone upon the ground, giant limbs, which, but the day before, spread themselves abroad in proud defiance of the storm. Vines were torn from their fastenings; flower-beds destroyed; choice shrubbery, tended with care for years, was shorn of its beauty. Even the solid earth had been invaded by floods of water, which ploughed deep furrows along its surface. And, saddest of all, *two human lives* had gone out, while the mad tempest raged in uncontrollable fury.

As the lover and maiden stood looking at the signs of *violence* so thickly scattered around, the former said, in a cheerful tone —

"For all his wild, desolating power — the tempest is vassal to the sun and dew. He may spread his sad trophies around in brief, blind rage; but they soon obliterate all traces of his path, and make beautiful, what he has scarred with wounds or disfigured by the trample of his iron heel."

"Not so, my children," said the calm voice of the maiden's father, to whose ears the remark had come. "Not so, my children. The sun and dew never *fully restore*, what the storm has broken and trampled upon. They may hide disfiguring marks, and cover with new forms of life and beauty the ruins which time can never restore. This is something, and we may take the blessing thankfully, and try to forget what is *lost*, or so *changed* as to be no longer desirable.

"Look at this fallen and shattered elm, my children. Is there any hope for that in the dew, the rain and sunshine? Can these build it up again, and spread out its arms as of old, bringing back to me, as it has done daily, the image of my early years? No, my children. After every *storm*, are *ruins* which can never be repaired. Is it not so with that lightning-stricken oak? And what art can restore to its exquisite loveliness, this *statue of hope*, thrown down by the ruthless hand of the unsparing tempest? Moreover, is there *human vitality* in the sunshine and

fructifying dew? Can they put life into the dead?

"No — no — my children. And take the lesson to heart. *Outward* tempests but typify and represent the fiercer tempests that too often desolate the human *soul*. In either case, something is lost that can never be restored. Beware, then, of *storms* — for wreck and ruin follow as surely as the passions rage!

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