

After the Storm

A New Acquaintance

By [Timothy Shay Arthur](#)

1868

Chapter 11.

Both Hartley and his wife came away from this experience, changed in themselves and toward each other. A few days had matured them beyond what might have been looked for in as many years. Life suddenly put on more sober hues, and the future laid off its smiles and beckonings onward to greener fields and mountain-heights of felicity. There was a certain air of manly self-confidence; a firmer, more deliberate way of expressing himself on all subjects; and an evidence of mental clearness and strength — which gave to Irene the impression of *power* and *superiority* not wholly agreeable to her self-will, yet awakening emotions of pride in her husband, when she contrasted him with other men. As a *man* among men, he was, as he had ever been, her beau ideal. But as a *husband*, she felt a daily increasing spirit of *resistance* and *antagonism*, and it required constant watchfulness over herself to prevent this *feeling* from exhibiting itself in *act*.

On the part of Hartley, the more he thought about this subject of the husband's domestic duties — thought as a man and as a lawyer — the more strongly did he feel about it, and the more tenacious of his assumed *rights* did he become. Matters which seemed in the beginning of such light importance as scarcely to attract his attention — now loomed up before him as things of importance. Thus, if he spoke of their doing some particular thing in a certain way, and Irene suggested a different way — instead of yielding to her view, he would insist upon his own. If she tried to show him a reason why her way was best, he would give no weight to her argument or representation. On the other hand, it is but just to say, that he rarely opposed her independent suggestions or interfered with her freedom; and if she had been as considerate toward him — the danger of trouble would have been lessened.

It is the *little foxes* which spoil the *tender grapes*, and so it is the little reactions of two spirits against each other — which spoil the *tender blossoms of love* and destroy the promised vintage. Steadily, day by day, and week by week, were these light reactions marring the happiness of our undisciplined young friends, and destroying in them, germ after germ, and bud after bud, which, if left to

growth and development, would have brought forth ripe, luscious fruit in the later summer of their lives. *Trifles*, as light as air were noticed, and their importance magnified. Words, looks, actions, insignificant in themselves, were made to represent states of *will* or *antagonism* which really had no existence.

Unhappily for their peace, Irene had a *brooding disposition*. She held in her memory, utterances and actions forgotten by her husband, and, by *dwelling* upon — *magnified* and gave them an importance to which they were not entitled.

Still more unhappily for their peace, Irene met about this time, and became attached to, a lady of fine intellectual attainments and fascinating manners, who was an *extremist* in opinion on the subject of marital equality. She was married — but to a man greatly her inferior, though possessing some literary talent, which he managed to turn to better account than she did her finer powers. He had been attracted by her brilliant qualities, and in approaching her, scorched his wings — and ever after lay at her feet. She had no very high respect for him — but found a husband on many accounts a convenient thing, and so held on to the *appendage*. If he had been *man* enough to remain silent on the themes she was so fond of discussing on all occasions, people of common sense and common perception would have respected him for what he was worth. But he gloried in his *bondage*, and *rattled his chains* as gleefully as if he were discoursing sweet music. What she announced oracularly — he attempted to demonstrate by bald and feeble arguments. He was the lackey to her perverted will.

The name of this lady was *Mrs. Talbot*. Irene met her soon after her marriage and removal to New York, and was charmed with her from the beginning. Hartley, on the contrary, liked neither her nor her sentiments, and considered her a *dangerous friend* for his wife. He expressed himself freely in regard to her at the commencement of the intimacy; but Irene took her part so warmly, and used such strong language in her favor, that Hartley deemed it wisest not to create a new conflict with his wife.

Within a week from that memorable Christmas day on which Irene came back from Ivy Cliff, Mrs. Talbot, who had taken a fancy to the spirited, independent, undisciplined wife of Hartley, called in to see her new friend. Irene received her cordially. She was, in fact, of all her acquaintances, the one she *most desired* to meet.

"I'm right glad you thought of making a visit to me," said Irene, as they sat down together. "I've felt as dull as an hermit, all the morning."

"You dull!" Mrs. Talbot affected surprise, as she glanced round the tasteful room in which they were sitting. "What is there to cloud your mind? With such a home and such a husband as you possess, life ought to be one long, bright holiday."

"Good things in their way," replied Irene. "But not *everything*."

She said this in a kind of thoughtless deference to Mrs. Talbot's known views on the subject of marriage and husbands — which she had not hesitated to call women's *prisons* and women's *jailers*.

"Indeed! And have you made that discovery?"

Mrs. Talbot laughed a low, gurgling sort of laugh, leaning, at the same time, in a confidential kind of way, closer to Irene.

"Discovery!"

"Yes."

"It is no discovery," said Irene. "The fact is self-evident. There is much that a woman needs for happiness, beside a home and a husband."

"Right, my young friend, right!" Mrs. Talbot's manner grew earnest. "No truer words were ever spoken. Yes — yes — a woman needs a great deal more than *these* to fill the measure of her happiness; and it is through the attempt to restrict and limit her to such poor substitutes for a world-wide range and *freedom* that she has been so dwarfed in mental stature, and made the unhappy creature and *slave* of man's hard ambition and *indomitable love of power*. There were *Amazons* of old — as the early *Greeks* knew to their cost — strong, self-reliant, courageous women, who acknowledged no male superiority. Is the Amazonian spirit dead in the earth? Not so! It is alive, and clothing itself with will, power and persistence. Already it is grasping the reins, and the mettled steed stands impatient to feel the rider's impulse in the saddle. The times of woman's *degradation* and *humiliation* is completed. A new era in the world's social history has dawned for her, and the mountain-tops are golden with the coming day."

Irene listened with delight and even enthusiasm to these sentiments, uttered with ardor and eloquence.

"It is not woman's fault, taking her in the aggregate, that she is so weak in body, and such a *passive slave* to man's will," continued Mrs. Talbot. "In the *degradation* of races toward *barbarism* — mere muscle, in which alone man is superior to woman, prevailed. Physical strength set itself up as master. *Might made right*. And so unhappy woman was *degraded* below man, and held under his despotism, until nearly all independent life has been crushed out of her. As civilization has lifted nation after nation out of the *dark depths of barbarism*, the condition of woman has been improved. For the sake of his children, if from no better motive, man has come to treat his wife with a more considerate kindness. If she is still but the *hewer of his wood* and *the drawer of his water* — he has, in many cases, elevated her to the position of *dictatress* in these humble affairs. He allows her 'help!' But, mentally and socially, he continues to *degrade* her. In law

she is scarcely recognized, except as a criminal. She is punished if she does wrong — but has no legal protection in her *rights* as an independent human being. She is only *man's shadow*. The public opinion that affects her, is made by him. The earliest literature of a country is man's expression; and in this, man's view of woman is always apparent. The sentiment is repeated generation after generation, and age after age — until the barbarous idea comes down, scarcely questioned, to the days of high civilization, culture and refinement.

"Here, my young friend, you have the simple history of *woman's degradation* in this age of the world. Now, so long as she *submits* — man will hold her in *fetters*. *Power* and *dominion* are sweet. If a man cannot govern a state — then he will be content to govern a *household*. But *govern* he will, if he can find a *submissive* subject anywhere."

"Man is born a *tyrant* — that I have always felt," said Irene. "You see it in a family of sisters and brothers. The boys always attempt to rule their sisters, and if the latter do not submit, then comes discord and contention."

"I have seen this, in hundreds of instances," replied Mrs. Talbot. "It was fully illustrated in my own case. I had two brothers, who undertook to exercise their love of *domineering* on me. But they did not find a passive subject — no, not by any means. I was never *obedient* to their *will*, for I had one of my own. We made the house often a bedlam for our poor mother; but I never gave way — no, not for an instant, come what might. I had different *stuff* in me from that of common girls, and in time, the boys were glad to let me alone."

"Are your brothers living?" asked Irene.

"Yes. One resides in New York, and the other in Boston. One is a merchant, the other a physician."

"How was it, as you grew older?"

"About the same. They are like nearly all men — *despisers* of woman's intellect."

Irene sighed, and, letting her eyes fall to the floor, sat lost in thought for some moments. The suggestions of her friend were not producing agreeable states of mind.

"They reject the doctrine of an *equality* in the sexes?" said Irene.

"Of course. *All men* do that," replied Mrs. Talbot.

"Your husband among the rest?"

"Talbot? Oh, he's well enough in his way!" The lady spoke lightly, tossing her

head in a manner that involved both indifference and contempt. "I never take him into account when discussing these matters. That *point was settled* between us long and long ago. We jog on without trouble. Talbot thinks as I do about the women — or pretends that he does, which is all the same."

"A rare exception to the general run of husbands," said Irene, thinking at the same time how immeasurably superior Hartley was to this weakling, and despising him in her heart for submitting to be ruled by a woman. Thus nature and true perception spoke in her, even while she was seeking to blind herself by *false reasonings*.

"Yes, he's a rare exception; and it's well for us both that it is so. If he were like your husband, for instance, one of us would have been before the legislature for a divorce within twelve months of our marriage night."

"Like my husband! What do you mean?" Irene drew herself up, with half real and half affected surprise.

"Oh, he's one of your men who have positive qualities about them — strong in intellect and will."

Irene felt pleased with the compliment bestowed upon her husband.

"But *wrong* in his ideas of woman."

"How do you know?" asked Irene.

"How do I know? As I know all men with whom I come in contact. I probe them."

"And you have probed my husband?"

"Undoubtedly."

"And do not regard him as sound on this subject?"

"No sounder than other men of his class. He regards woman as *man's inferior*."

"I think you state the case too strongly," said Irene, a red spot burning on her cheek. "He thinks them mentally *different*."

"Of course he does."

"But not different as to superiority and inferiority," replied Irene.

"Mere *hair-splitting*, my child. If they are mentally different, one must be more highly equipped than the other, and of course, superior. Hartley thinks a man's

rational powers stronger than a woman's, and that, therefore, he must direct in affairs generally, and she follow his lead. I know; I've talked with and drawn him out on this subject."

Irene sighed again faintly, while her eyes dropped from the face of her visitor and sunk to the floor. A *shadow* was falling on her spirit — a *weight* coming down with a gradually increasing pressure upon her heart. She remembered the night of her return from Ivy Cliff and the language then used by her husband on this very subject, which was mainly in agreement with the range of opinions attributed to him by Mrs. Talbot.

"Marriage, to a spirited, self-willed woman," she remarked, in a pensive undertone, "is a doubtful experiment."

"Always," returned her friend. "As woman stands now in the *estimate* of man — her chances for happiness are almost wholly on the side of *old-maidism*. Still, *freedom* is the price of *struggle* and *combat*; and woman will first have to show, in actual strife, that she is the *equal* of her present *lord*."

"Then you would turn every home into a battlefield?" said Irene.

"Every home in which there is a *tyrant* and an *oppressor*," was the prompt answer. "Many fair lands, in all ages, have been trampled down ruthlessly by the iron feet of war; and that were better, as the price of freedom, than slavery."

Irene sighed again, and was again silent.

"What," she asked, "if the *oppressor* is so much stronger than the oppressed, that successful resistance is impossible? that with every struggle, the links of the *chain* that binds her — sink deeper into her quivering flesh?"

"Every age and every land have seen noble martyrs in the cause of freedom. It is better to *die for liberty* — than *live as an ignoble slave*," answered the *tempter*.

"And I will die a free woman!" This Irene said in her heart.

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