

After the Storm

In Chains!

By Timothy Shay Arthur

1868

Chapter 12.

Sentiments like these, coming to Irene as they did while she was yet chafing under a recent collision with her husband, and while the question of *submission* was yet an open one — were nearly proving to be a quick *match* to a slumbering *tinder* in her spirit, and had not her husband been in a more passive state than usual, there might have been an *explosion* which would have driven them asunder with such terrific force, that reunion must have been next to impossible.

It would have been well if their *effects* had died with the passing away of that immediate danger. But as we *think* — so we incline to *act*. Our *sentiments* are our *governors*; and of all imperious tyrants — false sentiments are the most ruthless! The beautiful, the true, the good — they trample out of the heart with a fiery malignity that knows no touch of pity; for the *false* is the bitter enemy of the *true* — and makes with it no terms of peace.

The *coldness* which had followed their reconciliation might have gradually given way before the warmth of genuine love — if Irene had been left to the counsels of her own heart; if there had been no *enemy to her peace*, like Mrs. Talbot, to throw in wild, vague thoughts of *oppression* and *slavery* among the half-developed opinions which were forming in her mind. As it was, a jealous scrutiny of words and actions, took the place of that tender confidence which was coming back to Irene's heart, and she became watchfully on the alert; not, as she might have been — *lovingly accommodating*.

Only a few days were permitted to elapse after the call of this *unsafe friend*, before Irene returned the visit, and spent two hours with her, talking over the subject of *woman's rights and woman's wrongs*. Mrs. Talbot introduced her to *writers* on the vexed question, who had touched the theme with argument, sarcasm, invective and bold, brilliant, sophisticated generalities. She read to her from their books; commented on their deductions, and uttered sentiments on the subject of *reform and resistance*, as radical as the most extreme.

"We must agitate — we must act — we must do good deeds of valor and self-

sacrifice for our gender!" she said, in her enthusiastic way. "Every woman, whether of high or low condition, of humble powers or vigorous intellect — has a *duty* to perform, and she is false to the honor and rights of her gender if she does not array herself on the side of *freedom*. You have *great responsibilities* resting upon you, my young friend. I say it soberly, even solemnly. Responsibilities which may not be disregarded without evil consequences to yourself and others. You are young, clear-thoughted and resolute — you have will, purpose and endurance. You are married to a young man destined, I think, to make his mark in the world; but, as I have said before, a *false education* has given him erroneous ideas on this great and important subject. Now what is *your duty*?"

The lady paused, as if for an answer.

"What is your duty, my dear young friend?" she repeated.

"I will answer for you," she continued. "Your duty is to be true to yourself, and to your *sisters in chains*."

"In chains! / in chains!" Mrs. Talbot touched her to the quick.

"Are you a *free* woman?" The inquiry was calmly made.

Irene started to the floor and moved across the room, then turned and came back again. Her *cheeks* burned and her eyes flashed. She stood before Mrs. Talbot and looked at her steadily.

"The question has disturbed you?" said the lady.

"It has!" was the brief answer.

"Why should it disturb you?"

Irene did not answer.

"I can tell you."

"Say on."

"You are in chains — and feel the fetters!"

"Mrs. Talbot!"

"It is so, my poor child, and you know it as well as I do. From the beginning of our acquaintance, I have seen this; and more than once, in our various conversations, you have admitted the fact."

"I?"

"Yes, you!"

Irene let her thoughts run back through the sentiments and opinions which she had permitted herself to utter in the presence of her friend, to see if she had so fully shown her plight. She could not recall the distinct language — but it was plain that Mrs. Talbot had her *secret*, and therefore *reserve* on the subject was useless.

"Well," she said, after standing for some time before Mrs. Talbot, "if I am in chains — it is not because I do not worship freedom."

"I know that," was the quickly-spoken answer. "And it is because I wish to see you a *free woman* — that I point to your chains. Now is the time to *break* them — now, before *years* have increased their strength — now, before *habit* has made *tyranny* a part of your husband's nature. He is your ruler, because the social sentiment is in favor of *manly domination*. There is hope for you *now* — and now only. You must begin the work of *reaction* while both are young. Let your husband understand, from this time, that you are his *equal*. It may go a little hard at first. He will, without doubt, hold on to the *reins*, for *power* is sweet; but if there be true love for you in his heart, he will yield in the struggle, and make you his companion and *equal*, as you should be. If his love is not genuine, why — "

She checked herself. It might be going a step too far with her young friend to utter the thought that was coming to her lips. Irene did not question her as to what more she was about to say. There was *stimulus* enough in the words already spoken. She felt all the strength of her nature rising into *opposition*.

"Yes, I will be free," she said in her heart. "I will be his equal — not his slave!"

"It may cost you some pain in the beginning," resumed the tempter.

"I am not afraid of pain," said Irene.

"A brave heart spoke there. I wish we had more on our side with the stuff which you are made of. There would be hope of a speedier reform than is now promised."

"Heaven send the reform right early! It cannot come a day too soon." Irene spoke with rising ardor.

"It will be our own fault," said Mrs. Talbot, "if we bow our necks to the *yoke* longer, or move obedient to our *task-masters*! Let us lay the axe to the very root of this *evil* — and hew it down!"

"Even if we are crushed by the tree in falling!" responded Irene, in the spirit of a martyr.

From this interview, our wrong-directed young friend went home with more clearly defined purposes regarding her conduct toward her husband, than she had hitherto entertained. She saw him in a new aspect, and in a character more definitely outlined. He loomed up in more colossal proportions, and put on sterner features. All *disguises* were thrown away — and he stood forth, not a *loving husband* — but the *tyrant* of her home!

Weak, proud, passion-tossed child! how this strong, self-willed, false woman of the world had bewildered her thoughts, and pushed her forth into an arena of strife, where she could only beat about blindly, and hurt herself and others, yet accomplish no good!

From her interview with Mrs. Talbot, Irene went home, bearing more distinct ideas of *resistance* in her mind. In this great crisis of her life, she felt that she needed just such a friend, who could give direction to her striving spirit, and clothe for her in thoughts, the native impulses that she knew only as a *love of freedom*. She believed now that she understood herself better than before, and comprehended more clearly her duties and responsibilities.

It was in this mood of mind, that she met her husband when he returned in the afternoon from his office. Happily for them, he was in a quiet, non-resistant state, and in a special good-humor with himself and the world. Professional matters had shaped themselves to his wishes, and left his mind at peace. Irene had, in consequence, everything pretty much *her own way*. Hartley did not fail to notice a certain *sharpness of manner* about her, and a certain *spiciness of sentiment* when the subject of their intermittent talks verged on themes relating to women; but he felt no inclination whatever for argument or opposition, and so her *arrows* struck a polished shield, and turned harmlessly aside.

"Shall we go and have a merry laugh with Matthews tonight?" said Hartley, as they sat at the tea-table. "I feel just in the mood."

"No, thank you," replied Irene, curtly. "I don't incline to the laughing mood, just now."

"Laughing is contagious," suggested Hartley.

"I shall not go tonight!" And she balanced her little head with the perpendicularity of a plumb-line.

"Can't I persuade you?" He was in a real good-humor, and smiled as he said this.

"No, sir! You may waive both argument and persuasion. I am in earnest."

"And when a woman is in earnest — you might as well try to move the *Pillars of Hercules*."

"You might as well in *my* case," answered Irene, without any softening of tone or features.

"Then I shall not attempt, after a hard day's work, a task so difficult. I am in a mood for rest and quiet," said the young husband.

"Perhaps," he resumed, after a little pause, "you may feel somewhat *musical*. There is to be a vocal and instrumental concert tonight. What do you say to going there? I think I could enjoy some good singing."

Irene closed her lips firmly, and shook her head.

"Not *musically* inclined this evening?"

"No!" she replied.

"Got a regular stay-at-home feeling?"

"Yes!"

"Enough," said Hartley, with unshadowed good-humor, "we will stay at home then."

And he sung a snatch of the familiar song — "*There's no place like home*," rising, as he did so, from the table, and offering Irene his arm. She could do no less than accept the courtesy, and so they went up to their cozy sitting-room *arm-in-arm* — he chatty, and she almost silent.

"What's the matter, my pet?" he asked, in a fond way, after trying for some time — but in vain, to draw her out into pleasant conversation. "Are you well tonight?"

Now, so far as her bodily state was concerned, Irene never felt better in her life. So she could not plead sickness.

"I feel well," she replied, glancing up into her husband's face in a cold, embarrassed kind of way.

"Then your looks belie your condition — that's all. If it isn't the *body* — then it must be the *mind*. What's gone wrong, darling?"

The tenderness in Hartley's tones was genuine, and the heart of Irene leaped to his voice with a responsive throe. But was he not her *master* and *tyrant*? How

that thought chilled the sweet impulse!

"Nothing wrong!" she answered, with a sadness of tone which she was unable to conceal. "But I feel dull, and cannot help it."

"You should have gone with me to laugh with Matthews. He would have shaken all these *cobwebs* from your brain. Come! it is not yet too late."

But the *rebel spirit* was in her heart; and to have acceded to he husband's wishes, would have been to *submit herself to his control*.

"You must excuse me," she replied. "I feel as if home were the better place for me tonight."

An impatient answer was on her tongue; but she checked its utterance, and spoke from a better spirit.

Not ever had Hartley shown more *considerate tenderness* than marked all his conduct toward Irene this evening. His mind was in a clear-seeing region, and his feelings tranquil. The sphere of her *antagonism* failed to reach him. He did not understand the meaning of her opposition to his wishes, and so *pride, self-love* and *self-will* remained arresting in his heart. How peacefully unconscious was he of the fact that his feet were standing over a *landmine*, and that a single *spark* of passion struck from him, would have sprung that mine in fierce explosion! He read to Irene from a volume which he knew to be her favorite; talked to her about Ivy Cliff and her father; suggested an early visit to the pleasant old river home; and thus *charmed away the evil spirits* which had found a lodgment in her bosom.

But how different it *might* have been!

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