

After the Storm

The Reformers!

By Timothy Shay Arthur

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Chapter 13

Social *theories* that favor our passions, peculiarities, defects of character, or weaknesses — are readily adopted, and, with minds of an ardent temper, often become hobby-horses. There is a class of people who are never content with riding their own hobbies; they must have others mount with them. All the world is going wrong because it moves past them — trotting, pacing or galloping, as it may be, upon its own hobbies. And so they try to arrest this movement or that, or, gathering a company of aimless people, they brainwash them with their own wild purposes, and start them forth into the world on deluded errands.

These people are never content to wait for the slow changes that are included in all orderly developments. Because a thing seems right to them in the abstract — it must be done now. They cannot wait for old things to pass away, as preliminary to the inauguration of what is new.

"If I had the power," we have heard one of this class say, "evil and sorrow and pain would cease from the earth in a moment!" And in saying this, the thought was not concealed that God had this power — but failed to exercise it. With them no questions of expediency, no regard for time-endowed beliefs, no weak spirit of waiting, no looking for the fullness of time — could have any influence. What they willed to be done must be done now; and they are impatient and angry at everyone who stood in their way or opposed their theories.

In most cases, you will find these "reformers," as they generally style themselves, governed more by a *love of ruling* and influencing others — than by a spirit of love for humanity. They are one-sided people, and can only see one side of a subject in clear light. It matters little to them what is destroyed — just so that they can build. If they possess the gift of language, either as writers or talkers — have wit, brilliancy and sarcasm — they make disciples of the *less gifted*, and influence larger or smaller circles of men and women. Flattered by this homage to their talents, they grow more ardent in the cause which they have espoused — and see, or affect to see, little else of any importance in the world. They do *some good* and *much harm*. Good, in drawing general attention to social evils which

need reforming — evil, in causing weak people to forget common duties, in their ambition to set the world right.

There is always danger in breaking suddenly away from the regular progression of things and taking the lead in some new and antagonistic movement. Such things must and will be; but they who set up for *social reformers* must be men and women of pure hearts, clear minds and the broadest human sympathies. They must be lovers of humanity, not lovers of themselves; brave as patriots, not as soldiers of fortune who seek for booty and renown.

Not many of these true reformers — all honor to them! — are found among the noisy coteries which infest the land and turn so many foolish people away from real duties.

One of the dangers attendant on association with the class to which we refer, lies in the fact that they draw around them certain free-thinking, sensual personages, of no very stable morality, who are ready for anything that gives excitement to their morbid conditions of mind. Social disasters, of the saddest kind, are constantly occurring through this cause. Men and women become at first unsettled in their *opinions*, then unsettled in their *conduct* — and finally throw off all virtuous restraint.

Mrs. Talbot, the new *friend* of Irene, belonged to the better sort of reformers in one respect. She was a pure-minded woman; but this did not keep her out of the circle of those who were of freer thought and action. Being an *extremist* on the subject of woman's social position, she met and assimilated with others on the basis of a common sentiment. This threw her in contact with many from whom she would have shrunk with instinctive aversion, had she known their true morality. Still, to her the *evil* of *old conservative* ideas in regard to the institution of marriage, was a gradual wearing away, by the power of steady attrition. There was always a great deal said on this subject, in a light way, by people for whose opinions on other subjects she had the highest respect, and this had its influence. Insensibly her views and feelings changed, until she found herself, in some cases, the *advocate* of sentiments that she once would have been rejected with instinctive repugnance.

This was the *woman* who went about acquiring a strong influence over the undisciplined, self-willed and too self-reliant young wife of Hartley Emerson; and this was the class of personages among whom her dangerous friend was about introducing her. At the house of Mrs. Talbot, where Irene became a frequent visitor, she met a great many brilliant, talented and fascinating people, of whom she often spoke to her husband, for she was too independent to have any concealments. She knew that he did not like Mrs. Talbot — but this rather inclined her to a favorable estimation, and really led to a more frequent fellowship than would otherwise have been the case.

Once a week Mrs. Talbot held a special meeting, at which brilliant people, and people with fascinating hobbies met to hear themselves talk. Mr. and Mrs. Emerson had a standing invitation to be present at these reunions, and, as Irene wished to go, her husband saw it best not to interpose *obstacles*. Besides, as he knew that she went to Mrs. Talbot's often in the day-time, and met a good many people there, he wished to see for himself who they were, and judge for himself as to their quality. Of the men who frequented the parlors of Mrs. Talbot, the larger number had some *prefix* to their names, as Professor, Doctor, Major, or Colonel. Most of the ladies were of a decidedly literary turn — some had written books, some were magazine contributors, one was a physician, and one a public lecturer. Nothing against them in all this — but much to their honor if their talents and acquirements were used for the common good.

The themes of conversation at these weekly gatherings were varied — but social relations and social reform, were in most cases the leading topics. Two or three evenings at Mrs. Talbot's were enough to satisfy Hartley that the people who met there were not of a character to exercise a *good influence* upon his wife. But how was he to keep her from associations that evidently presented strong attractions? He feared to make direct opposition, for the experience of a few months had been sufficient to show him that she would resist all attempts on his part to exercise a *controlling* influence.

He tried at first to keep her away by pretending slight sickness, or weariness, or disinclination to go out, and so lead her to exercise some *self-denial* for his sake. But her mind was too firmly bent on going to be turned so easily from its purpose; she did not consider *trifles* like these, of sufficient importance to interfere with the pleasures of an evening at one of Mrs. Talbot's special meetings. Hartley felt hurt at his wife's plain disregard of his comfort and wishes, and said within himself, with bitterness of feeling, that *she was heartless*.

One day, at dinner-time, he said to her —

"I shall not be able to go to Mrs. Talbot's tonight."

"Why?" Irene looked at her husband in surprise, and with a shade of disappointment on her countenance.

"I have business of importance with a gentleman who resides in Brooklyn, and have promised to meet him at his house this evening."

"You might call for me on your return," said Irene.

"The time of my return will be uncertain. I cannot now tell how late I may be detained in Brooklyn."

"I'm sorry." And Irene bent down her eyes in a thoughtful way. "I promised Mrs.

Talbot to be there tonight," she added.

"Mrs. Talbot will excuse you when she knows why you were absent."

"I don't know about that," said Irene.

"She must be a very unreasonable woman," remarked Hartley.

"That doesn't necessarily follow. You could take me there, and Mrs. Talbot could find me an escort home."

"Who?" Hartley knit his brows and glanced sharply at his wife. The suggestion struck him unpleasantly.

"Major Willard, for instance;" and she smiled in a half-amused, half-mischievous way.

"You cannot be in earnest, surely?" said Hartley.

"Why not?" queried his wife, looking at her husband with calm, searching eyes.

"You would not, in the first place, be present there, unaccompanied by your husband; and, in the second place, I hardly think my wife would be seen in the street, at night, on the arm of Major Willard."

Hartley spoke like a man who was in earnest.

"Do you know anything wrong of Major Willard?" asked Irene.

"I know nothing about him, right or wrong," was replied. "But, if I have any skill in reading men, he is very far from being a moral man."

"Why, Hartley! You have let some prejudice come in to warp your estimation."

"No. I have mixed some with men, and, though my opportunity for observation has not been large, I have met two or three of your *Major Willards*. They are polished and attractive on the surface — but unprincipled and corrupt."

"I cannot believe this of Major Willard," said Irene.

"It might be safer for you to believe it," replied Hartley.

"Safer! I don't understand you! You talk in riddles? How safer?"

Irene showed some irritation.

"Safer as to your good name," replied her husband.

"My good name is in my own keeping," said the young wife, *proudly*.

"Then, for Heaven's sake, remain its safe custodian," replied Hartley. "Don't let even the shadow of a man like Major Willard fall upon it."

"I am sorry to see you so prejudiced," said Irene, coldly; "and sorry, still further, that you have so poor an opinion of your wife."

"You misapprehend me," returned Hartley. "I am neither prejudiced nor suspicious. But seeing *danger* in your way, as a prudent man I lift a voice of warning. I am out in the world more than you are, and see more of its worst side. My profession naturally opens to me doors of observation that are shut to many. I see the inside of character, where others look only upon the fair outside."

"And so learn to be suspicious of everybody," said Irene.

"No — only to read *indices* that to many others are unintelligible."

"I must learn to read them also."

"It would be well if your gender and place in the world gave the right opportunity," replied Hartley.

"Truly said. And that touches the main question. Women, *immured* as they now are, and never allowed to go out into the world unless guarded by husband, brother or discreet managing friend — will continue as weak and indiscriminating as the great mass of them now are. But, so far as I am concerned, this system is destined to change. I must be permitted a larger liberty, and opportunities for independent observation. I wish to read character for myself, and make up my own mind in regard to the people I meet."

"I am only sorry," rejoined her husband, "that your first effort at reading character and making up independent opinions in regard to men and principles, had not found scope in another direction. I am afraid that, in trying to get close enough to the people you meet at Mrs. Talbot's for accurate observation, you will draw so near to *dangerous fires* — as to *scorch* your garments."

"Compliments to Mrs. Talbot!"

"The remark simply gives you my estimate of some of her favored visitors."

"And compliments to your wife," added Irene.

"My wife," said Hartley, in a serious voice, "is, like myself, young and

inexperienced, and should be particularly cautious in regard to all new acquaintances — men or women — particularly if they be some years her senior, and particularly if they show any marked desire to cultivate her acquaintance. People with a large worldly experience, like most of those we have met at Mrs. Talbot's, take you and I at disadvantage. They read us through at a single sitting, while it may take us months, even years, to penetrate the *disguises* they know so well how to assume."

"Nearly all of which, concerning the pleasant people we meet at Mrs. Talbot's, is assumed," replied Irene, not at all moved by her husband's earnestness.

"You may learn to your sorrow, when the knowledge comes too late," he responded, "that even more than I have *assumed* is true."

"I am not in fear of the sorrow," was answered lightly.

As Irene, against all argument, persuasion and remonstrance on the part of her husband — persisted in her determination to go to Mrs. Talbot's; Hartley engaged a carriage to take her there and to call for her at eleven o'clock.

"Come away alone," he said, with impressive earnestness, as he parted from her. "Don't let any courteous offer induce you to accept an attendant when you return home."

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