

After the Storm

A Startling Experience

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Chapter 14

A Startling Experience

Irene did not feel altogether comfortable in mind as she rode away from her door alone. She was going unattended by her husband, and against his warmly-spoken remonstrance, to pass an evening with people of whom she knew but little, and against whom he had strong prejudices.

"It were better to have remained at home," she said to herself more than once before her arrival at Mrs. Talbot's. The marked attentions she received, as well from Mrs. Talbot as from several of her guests, soon brought her spirits up to the old elevation. Among those who seemed most attracted by her, was Major Willard, to whom reference has already been made.

"Where is your husband?" was almost his first inquiry on meeting her. "I do not see him in the room."

"He had to meet a gentleman on business over in Brooklyn this evening," replied Irene.

"Ah, business!" said the major, with a shrug, a movement of the eyebrows and a motion in the corners of his mouth which were not intelligible signs to Irene. That they meant something more than he was prepared to utter in words, she was satisfied — but whether of favorable or unfavorable import concerning her absent husband, she could not tell. The impression on her mind was not agreeable, and she could not help remembering what Hartley had said about the major.

"I notice," remarked the latter, "that we have several ladies here who come usually without their husbands. Gentlemen are not always attracted by the *feast of reason* and the *flow of soul*. They require something more substantial. Oysters and turtles are nearer to their fancy."

"Not more to *my* husband's fancy," replied Irene, in a tone of vindication, as well

as rebuke at such freedom of speech.

"Beg your pardon a thousand times, madam!" returned Major Willard, "if I have even seemed to speak lightly of one who holds the honored position of your husband. Nothing could have been farther from my thought. I was only *trifling*."

Irene smiled her forgiveness, and the major became more polite and attentive than before. But his attentions were not wholly agreeable. Something in the expression of his eyes as he looked at her, produced an unpleasant repulsion. She was constantly remembering some of the cautions spoken by Hartley in reference to this man, and she wished scores of times that he would turn his attentions to someone else. But the major seemed to have no eyes for any other lady in the room.

In spite of the innate repulsion to which we have referred, Irene was flattered by the polished major's devotion of himself almost wholly to her during the evening, and she could do no less in return than make herself as agreeable as possible.

At eleven o'clock she had notice that her carriage was at the door. The major was by, and heard the communication. So, when she came down from the dressing-room, he was waiting for her in the hall, ready cloaked and gloved.

"No, Major Willard, I thank you," she said, on his making a movement to accompany her. She spoke very positively.

"I cannot see you go home unattended." And the major bowed with graceful politeness.

"Oh no," said Mrs. Talbot. "You must not leave my house alone. Major, I shall expect you to attend my young friend."

It was in vain that Irene objected and remonstrated, the gallant major would listen to nothing; and so, perforce, she had to yield. After handing her into the carriage, he spoke a word or two in an undertone to the driver, and then entering, took his place by her side.

Irene felt strangely uncomfortable and embarrassed, and shrunk as far from her companion as the narrow space they occupied would permit; while he, it seemed to her, approached as she receded. There was a different tone in his voice when he spoke as the carriage moved away, from any she had noticed heretofore. He drew his face near to hers in speaking — but the rattling of the wheels made hearing difficult. He had, during the evening, referred to a star actress then occupying public attention, of whom some scandalous things had been said, and declared his belief in her innocence. To Irene's surprise — almost disgust — his first remark after they were seated in the carriage was about this actress. Irene did not respond to his remark.

"Did you ever meet her in private circles?" he next inquired.

"No, sir," she answered, coldly.

"I have had that pleasure," said Major Willard.

There was no responsive word.

"She is a most fascinating woman," continued the major. "That goddess-like beauty which so distinguishes her on the stage scarcely shows itself in the drawing-room. On the stage she is queenly — in private, soft, delightful and winning as an angel. I don't wonder that she has crowds of admirers."

The major's face was close to that of his companion, who felt a wild sense of repugnance, so strong as to be almost suffocating. The carriage bounded as the wheels struck an inequality in the street, throwing them together with a slight collision. The major laid his hand upon that of Irene, as if to support her. But she instantly withdrew the hand he had presumed to touch. He attempted the same familiarity again — but she placed both hands beyond the possibility of accidental or designed contact with his, and shrank still closer into the corner of the carriage, while her heart fluttered and a tremor ran through her frame.

Major Willard spoke again of the actress — but Irene made no reply.

"Where are we going?" she asked, after the lapse of some ten minutes, glancing from the window and seeing, instead of the tall rows of stately houses which lined the streets along the whole distance between Mrs. Talbot's residence and her own house, base-looking tenements.

"The driver knows his route, I presume," was answered.

"This is not the way, I am sure," said Irene, a slight quiver of alarm in her voice.

"Our drivers know the shortest cuts," replied the major, "and these do not always lead through the most attractive quarters of the town."

Irene shrank back again in her seat and was silent. Her heart was throbbing with a vague fear. Suddenly the carriage stopped and the driver alighted.

"This is not my home," said Irene, as the driver opened the door, and the major stepped out upon the pavement.

"Oh, yes. This is No. 240 Lambert street. Yes, ma'am," added the driver, "this is the number that the gentleman told me."

"What gentleman?" asked Irene.

"This gentleman, if you please, ma'am."

"Drive me home instantly, or this may cost you dear!" said Irene, in as stern a voice as surprise and fear would permit her to assume.

"Madam . . ." Major Willard commenced speaking.

"Silence, sir! Shut the door, driver, and take me home instantly!"

The major made a movement as if he were about to enter the carriage, when Irene said, in a low, steady, threatening voice —

"At your peril, remain outside! Driver, shut the door. If you permit that man to enter, my husband will hold you to a strict account."

"Stand back!" exclaimed the driver, in a resolute voice.

But the major was not to be put off in this way. He did not move from the open door of the carriage. In the next moment the driver's vigorous arm had hurled him across the pavement. The door was shut, the box mounted and the carriage whirled away, before the astonished man could rise, half stunned, from the place where he fell. A few base, bitter, impotent *curse*s fell from his lips, and then he walked slowly away, muttering threats of vengeance.

It was nearly twelve o'clock when Irene reached home.

"You are late," said her husband, as she came in.

"Yes," she replied, "later than I intended."

"What's the matter?" he inquired, looking at her narrowly.

"Why do you ask?" She tried to put on an air of indifference.

"You look pale and your voice is disturbed."

"The driver went through parts of the town in returning that made me feel nervous, as I thought of my lonely and unprotected situation."

"Why did he do that?"

"It wasn't to make the way shorter, for the direct route would have brought me home ten minutes ago. I declare! The fellow's conduct made me right nervous. I thought a dozen improbable things."

"It is the last time I will employ him," said Hartley. "How dare he go a single block away from a direct course, at this late hour?" He spoke with rising indignation.

At first, Irene resolved to inform her husband of Major Willard's conduct — but it will be seen by this conversation that she had changed her mind, at least for the present. Two or three things caused her to hesitate until she could turn the matter over in her thoughts more carefully. *Pride* had its influence. She did not care to admit that she had been in *error* and Hartley right, as to Major Willard. But there was a more sober aspect of the case. Hartley was excitable, brave and strong-willed. She feared the consequences that might follow if he were informed of Major Willard's outrageous conduct. A personal confrontation she saw to be almost inevitable in this event. Mortifying publicity, if not the shedding of blood, would ensue.

So, for the present at least, she resolved to keep her own secret, and evaded the close queries of her husband, who was considerably disturbed by the alleged conduct of the driver.

One good result followed this rather startling experience. Irene said no more about attending the meetings of Mrs. Talbot. She did not care to meet Major Willard again, and as he was a regular visitor at Mrs. Talbot's, she couldn't go there without encountering him. Her absence on the next social evening was remarked by her new friend, who called on her the next day.

"I didn't see you last night," said the agreeable Mrs. Talbot.

"No, I remained at home," replied Irene, the smile with which she had received her friend fading partly away.

"Not sick, I hope?"

"No."

"But your husband was! Talk it right out, my pretty one!" said Mrs. Talbot, in a mirthful, bantering tone. "Indisposed in mind. He doesn't like the class of people one meets at my house. Men of his stamp never do."

It was on the lips of Irene to say that there might be ground for his dislike of some who were met there. But she repressed even a remote reference to an affair that, for the gravest of reasons, she still desired to keep as her own secret. So she merely answered —

"The indisposition of mind was on *my* part."

"On your part? Oh dear! That alters the case. And, pray, what occasioned this

indisposition? Not a previous mental excess, I hope."

"Oh no. I never get an excess in good company. But people's states vary, as you are aware. I had a stay-at-home feeling last night, and indulged myself."

"Very prettily said, my dear. I understand you entirely, and like your frank, outspoken way. This is always best with friends. I desire all of mine to enjoy the largest liberty — to come and see me when they feel like it, and to stay away when they don't feel like coming. We had a delightful time. Major Willard was there. He's a charming man! Several times through the evening he asked for you. I really think your absence worried him. Now, don't blush! A handsome, accomplished man may admire a handsome and accomplished woman, without anything wrong being involved. Because one has a husband, is she not to be spoken to or admired by other men? Nonsense! That is the world's weak *prudery*, or rather the common social sentiment based on man's tyranny over woman."

As Mrs. Talbot ran on in this strain, Irene had time to reflect and school her exterior. Toward Major Willard her feelings were those of *disgust* and *detestation*. The utterance of his name shocked her womanly delicacy — but when it was coupled with a sentiment of admiration for her, and an intimation of the probable existence of something reciprocal on her part — it was with difficulty that she could restrain a burst of indignant feeling. But her strong will helped her, and she gave no intelligible sign of what was really passing in her thoughts. The subject being altogether disagreeable, she changed it as soon as possible.

In this interview with Mrs. Talbot a new impression in regard to her was made on the mind of Irene. Something *impure* seemed to pervade the mental atmosphere with which she was surrounded, and there seemed to be things involved in what she said, that shadowed a latitude in morals wholly outside of Christian duty. When they separated, much of the enthusiasm which Irene had felt for this sophisticated, unsafe acquaintance was gone, and her power over her was in the same measure lessened.

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