

After the Storm

Captivated Again

By [Timothy Shay Arthur](#)

1868

Chapter 15.

But it is not so easily escaping from a woman like Mrs. Talbot, when an acquaintanceship is once formed. In less than a week she called again, and this time in company with another lady, a Mrs. Lloyd, whom she introduced as a very dear friend. Mrs. Lloyd was a tall, lean woman, with an intellectual face, bright, restless, penetrating eyes, a clear musical voice, subdued — but winning manners. She was a little past thirty, though sickness of body or mind had stolen the bloom of early womanhood, and carried her forward, apparently, to the verge of forty. Irene had never before heard of this lady. But half an hour's conversation completely captivated her. Mrs. Lloyd had traveled through Europe, and spoke in a familiar way of the celebrated personages whom she had met abroad — talked of art, music and architecture, literature, artists and literary men — displayed such *high culture* and easy acquaintance with themes quite above the range usually met with among ordinary people, that Irene felt really flattered with the compliment of a visit.

"My good friend, Mrs. Talbot," said Mrs. Lloyd, during their conversation, "has spoken of you so warmly that I could do no less than make overtures for an acquaintance, which I trust may prove agreeable. I anticipated the pleasure of seeing you at her house last week — but was disappointed."

"The interview of today," remarked Mrs. Talbot, coming in adroitly, "will only make pleasanter your meeting on tomorrow night."

"At your house?" said Mrs. Lloyd.

"Yes." And Mrs. Talbot threw a winning smile upon Irene. "You will be there?"

"I think not," was replied.

"Oh — but you must come, my dear Irene! We cannot do without you."

"I have promised my husband to go out with him."

"*Your husband!*" The voice of Mrs. Talbot betrayed too plainly her *contempt* of husbands.

"Yes, my *husband*." Irene let her voice dwell with meaning on the word.

The other ladies looked at each other for a moment or two with meaning glances; then Mrs. Talbot remarked, in a quiet way — but with a little pleasantry in her voice, as if she were not right clear in regard to her young friend's state of feeling,

"Oh dear! these *husbands* are dreadfully in the way, sometimes! Haven't you found it so, Mrs. Lloyd?"

The eyes of Irene were turned instantly to the face of her new acquaintance. She saw a slight change of expression in her pale face that took something from its agreeable aspect. And yet Mrs. Lloyd smiled as she answered, in a way meant to be pleasant,

"They are very good — in their place."

"The trouble," remarked Mrs. Talbot, in reply, "is to make them *keep* their place."

"At our feet!" Irene laughed as she said this.

"No," answered Mrs. Lloyd — "at our *sides*, as equals."

"And beyond that," said Mrs. Talbot, "we want them to give us as much *freedom* in the world as they take for themselves. They come in and go out when they please, and *submit* to no questioning on our part. Very well; I don't object — I only claim the same right for myself. '*I will ask my husband.*' Don't you hear this said every day? Pah! I'm always tempted to cut the acquaintance of a woman when I hear these words from her lips. Does a man, when a friend asks him to do anything or go anywhere, say, '*I'll ask my wife?*' Not he. A lady who comes occasionally to our weekly reunions — but whose husband is too much of a *man* to put himself down to the level of our set — is *permitted* the enjoyment of an evening with us, now and then — but on *one condition*."

"Condition!" There was a throb of indignant feeling in the voice of Mrs. Lloyd.

"Yes, on condition that no male visitor at my house shall accompany her home. A carriage is sent for her precisely at ten o'clock, when she must leave, and alone."

"*How humiliating!*" ejaculated Mrs. Lloyd.

"Isn't it? I can scarcely have patience with her. Major Willard has, at my insistence, several times made an effort to accompany her, and once actually

entered her carriage. But the lady commanded him to retire, or she would leave the carriage herself. Of course, when she took that position, the gallant major had to leave the field."

"Such a *restriction* would scarcely have suited my fancy," said Mrs. Lloyd.

"Nor mine. What do you think of that?" And Mrs. Talbot looked into the face of Irene, whose color had risen beyond its usual tone.

"Circumstances alter cases," replied the latter, crushing out all feeling from her voice and letting it fall into a dead level of indifference.

"But *circumstances* don't alter *facts*, my dear. There are the hard facts of *restrictions* and *conditions* — made by a *man*, and applied to his equal, a woman. Does she say to him, You can't go to your club *unless* you return alone in your carriage, and leave the club-house precisely at ten o'clock? Oh no. He would laugh in her face, or, perhaps, consult the family physician concerning her sanity!"

This mode of putting the question rather bewildered the mind of our young wife, and she dropped her eyes from those of Mrs. Talbot and sat looking upon the floor in silence.

"Can't you get your husband to release you from this engagement of which you have spoken?" asked Mrs. Lloyd. "I would like above all things to meet you tomorrow evening."

Irene smiled as she answered,

"Husbands have rights, you know, as well as wives. We must consult their pleasure sometimes, as well as our own."

"Certainly — certainly." Mrs. Lloyd spoke with visible impatience.

"I promised to go with my husband tomorrow night," said Irene; "and, much as I may desire to meet you at Mrs. Talbot's, I am not at liberty to go there."

"In *chains!* Ah me! Poor wives!" sighed Mrs. Talbot, in affected pity. "*Not at liberty!* The admission which comes to us from all sides."

She laughed in her gurgling, hollow way as she said this.

"Not bound to my *husband* — but to my *word* of promise," replied Irene, as pleasantly as her disturbed feelings would permit her to speak. The ladies were pressing her a little too closely, and she both saw and felt this. They were stepping beyond the bounds of *reason* and *delicacy*.

Mrs. Lloyd saw the state of mind which had been produced, and at once changed the subject.

"May I flatter myself with the prospect of having this call returned?" she said, handing Irene her card as she was about leaving.

"It will give me great pleasure to know you better, and you may look to seeing me right early," was the bland reply. And yet Irene was not really attracted by this woman, but, on the contrary, *repelled*. There was something in her keen, searching eyes, which seemed to be looking right into the thoughts, that gave her a feeling of doubt.

"Thank you. The favor will be all on my side," said Mrs. Lloyd, as she held the hand of Irene and gave it a warm pressure.

The visit of these ladies did not leave the mind of Irene in a very satisfactory state. Some things that were said she rejected, while other things lingered and occasioned suggestions which were not favorable to her husband. While she had no wish to be present at Mrs. Talbot's on account of Major Willard, she was annoyed by the thought that Hartley's fixing on the next evening for her to go out with him, was to prevent her attendance at the weekly meeting.

Irene did not mention to her husband the fact that she had received a visit from Mrs. Talbot, in company with a pleasant stranger, Mrs. Lloyd. It would have been far better for her if she had done so. Many times it was on her lips to mention the call — but as often she kept silent, one or the other of two considerations having influence. Hartley did not like Mrs. Talbot, and therefore the mention of her name, and the fact of her calling — would not be pleasant theme. The other consideration had reference to a *woman's independence*.

"He doesn't tell me of every man he meets through the day, and why should I feel under obligation to speak of every lady who calls?" So she thought. "As to Mrs. Lloyd, he would have a hundred prying question's to ask, as if I were not competent to judge of the character of my own friends and acquaintances?"

Within a week the call of Mrs. Lloyd was reciprocated by Irene; not in consequence of feeling drawn toward that lady — but she had *promised* to return the friendly visit, and must keep her word. She found her domiciled in a fashionable boarding-house, and was received in the common parlor, in which were two or three ladies and a gentleman, besides Mrs. Lloyd. The greeting she received was warm, almost affectionate. In spite of the prejudice that was creeping into her mind in consequence of an unfavorable first impression, Irene was flattered by her reception, and before the termination of her visit she was satisfied that she had not, in the beginning, formed a right estimate of this really fascinating woman.

"I hope to see you right soon," she said, as she bade Mrs. Lloyd good-morning. "It will not be my fault if we do not soon know each other better."

"Nor mine either," replied Mrs. Lloyd. "I think I shall find you just after my own heart."

The voice of Mrs. Lloyd was a little raised as she said this, and Irene noticed that a gentleman who was in the parlor when she entered — but to whom she had not been introduced, turned and looked at her with a steady, curious gaze, which struck her at the time as being on the verge of unfitness.

Only two or three days passed before Mrs. Lloyd returned this visit. Irene found her more interesting than ever. She had seen a great deal of society, and had met, according to her own story, with most of the distinguished men and women of the country, about whom she talked in a very agreeable manner. She described their personal appearance, habits, peculiarities and manners, and related pleasant anecdotes about them. On authors and books — she was entirely at home.

But there was an *undercurrent of feeling* in all she said that a wiser and more experienced woman than Irene would have noted. It was not a feeling of admiration for *moral* beauty — but for *intellectual* beauty. She could dissect a *character* with wonderful skill — but always passed the quality of *morality*, as not taken into account. In her view, this quality did not seem to be a positive element.

When Mrs. Lloyd went away, she left the mind of Irene stimulated, restless and fluttering with vague imaginations. She felt envious of her new friend's accomplishments, and ambitious to move in as wide a sphere as she had compassed. The visit was returned at an early period, and, as before, Irene met Mrs. Lloyd in the public parlor of her boarding-house. The same gentleman whose manner had a little annoyed her was present, and she noticed several times, on glancing toward him, that his eyes were fixed upon her, and with an expression that she did not understand.

After this, the two ladies met every day or two, and sometimes walked Broadway together. The only information that Irene had in regard to her attractive friend — she received from Mrs. Talbot. According to her statement, she was a *widow* whose married life had not been a happy one. Her husband, like most husbands, was an *overbearing tyrant* — and Mrs. Lloyd, having a spirit of her own, resisted his *authority*. Trouble was the consequence, and Mrs. Talbot thought, though she was not certain, that a *divorce* took place before Mr. Lloyd's death. She had a moderate income, which came from her husband's estate, on which she lived in a kind of *idle independence*. So she had plenty of time to read, visit and enjoy herself in the ways her imagination or inclination might prompt.

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