

After the Storm

Gone Forever!

By [Timothy Shay Arthur](#)

1868

Chapter 17.

One evening — it was nearly three years from the date of their marriage — Hartley and his wife were sitting opposite to each other at the center-table, in the evening. She had a *book* in her hand and he held a *newspaper* before his face — but his eyes were not on the printed columns. He had spoken only a few words since he came in, and his wife noticed that he had the manner of one whose mind is in doubt or perplexity.

Letting the newspaper fall upon the table at length, Hartley looked over at his wife and said, in a quiet tone,

"Irene, did you ever meet a lady by the name of *Mrs. Lloyd*?"

The color mounted to the face of Irene as she replied,

"Yes, I have met her often."

"Since when?"

"I have known her intimately for the past two years."

"What!"

Hartley started to his feet and looked for some moments steadily at his wife, his countenance expressing the profoundest astonishment.

"And never once mentioned to me her name! Has she ever called here?"

"Yes."

"Often?"

"As often as two or three times a week."

"Irene!"

Irene, bewildered at first by her husband's manner of interrogating her, now recovered her self-possession, and, rising, looked steadily at him across the table.

"I am wholly at a loss to understand you," she now said, calmly.

"Have you ever visited her at her boarding-house?" demanded Hartley.

"I have, often."

"And walked Broadway with her?"

"Certainly."

"Good heavens! can it be possible!" exclaimed the excited man.

"Why do you ask about Mrs. Lloyd?" said Irene.

"A *disgraceful* woman!" was answered passionately.

"That is false!" said Irene, her eyes flashing as she spoke. "I don't care who says so, I pronounce the words false!"

Hartley stood still and gazed at his wife for some moments without speaking; then he sat down at the table from which he had arisen and, shading his face with his hands, remained motionless for a long time. He seemed like a man utterly confounded.

"Did you ever hear of *Jane Beaufort*?" he asked at length, looking up at his wife.

"Oh yes; everybody has heard of her."

"Would you visit Jane Beaufort?"

"Yes, if I believed her innocent of what the world charges against her."

"You are aware, then, that Mrs. Lloyd and Jane Beaufort are the *same* person?"

"No, sir, I am not aware of any such thing."

"It is true."

"I do not believe it. Mrs. Lloyd I have known intimately for over two years, and can verify her character."

"I am sorry for you, then, for a *viler character* it would be difficult to find outside the haunts of infamy," said Hartley.

Contempt and *anger* were suddenly blended in his manner.

"I cannot hear one to whom I am warmly attached thus assailed. You must not speak in that style of *my friends*, Hartley!"

"Your friends!" There was a look of *intense scorn* on his face. "Precious friends, if *she* represents them, truly! *Major Willard* is another of your *friends*, perhaps?"

The face of Irene turned deadly pale at the mention of this name.

"Ha!"

Hartley bent eagerly toward his wife.

"And is *that* true, also?"

"What? Speak out, Hartley!" Irene caught her breath, and grasped the rein of self-control which had dropped, a moment, from her hands.

"It is said that Major Willard bears you company, at times, in your rides home from evening calls upon your precious friends."

"And do you believe the story?"

"I didn't believe it," said Hartley — but in a tone that showed doubt.

"But have changed your mind?"

"If you say it is not true — that Major Willard never entered your carriage — I will take *your word* in opposition to the whole world's adverse testimony."

But Irene could not answer. Major Willard, as the reader knows, had ridden with her at night, and alone. But once, and only once. A few times since then, she had encountered — but never deigned to recognize, him. In her pure heart, the man was held in utter detestation.

Now was the time for a full explanation; but *pride* was aroused — strong, stubborn *pride!* She knew herself to stand triple mailed in innocency — to be free from weakness or taint; and the thought that a mean, base suspicion had entered the mind of her husband, aroused her indignation and put a seal upon her lips as to all *explanatory* utterances.

"Then am I to believe the worst?" said Hartley, seeing that his wife did not answer. "The worst — and of *you!*"

The *tone* in which this was said, as well as the words themselves, sent a strong throb to the heart of Irene. "The worst — and of *you!*" This from her husband! and involving far more in tone and manner than in uttered language. "Then I am to believe the worst!" She turned the sentences over in her mind. *Pride*, wounded self-love, a smothered sense of indignation, blind anger, began to gather their gloomy forces in her mind. "The worst, and of *you!*" How the echoes of these words came back in constant repetition! "The worst, and of *you!*"

"How often has Major Willard ridden with you at night?" asked Hartley, in a cold, resolute way.

No answer.

"And did you always come directly home?"

Hartley was looking steadily into the face of his wife, from which he saw the color fall away until it became of an ashen hue.

"You do not care to answer. Well, *silence* is indicative," said the husband, closing his lips firmly. There was a blending of anger, perplexity, pain, sorrow and scorn in his face — all of which Irene read distinctly as she fixed her eyes steadily upon him. He tried to gaze back until her eyes should sink beneath his steady look — but the effort was lost; for not a single instant did they waver.

He was about to turn away, when she arrested the movement by saying,

"Go on, Hartley! Speak of all that is in your mind. You have now an opportunity that may never come again."

There was a dead level in her voice that a little puzzled her husband.

"It is for *you* to speak," he answered. "I have put my interrogatories."

Unhappily, there was a shade of imperiousness in his voice.

"I never answer *insulting* interrogatories; not even from the man who calls himself my husband," replied Irene, haughtily.

"It may be *best* for you to answer," said Hartley. There was just the shadow of menace in his tones.

"Best!" The lip of Irene curled slightly. "On *whose* account, pray?"

"Best for each of us. Whatever affects one injuriously — must affect both."

"Humph! So we are *equals!*" Irene tossed her head impatiently, and laughed a short, mocking laugh.

"Nothing of that, if you please!" was the husband's impatient retort. The sudden change in his wife's manner threw him off his guard.

"Nothing of *what?*" demanded Irene.

"Of that weak, silly nonsense. We have graver matters in hand for consideration now."

"Ah?" She threw up her eyebrows, then contracted them again with an angry severity.

"Irene," said Hartley, his voice falling into a *calm* but *severe* tone, "all this is but weakness and folly. I have heard things concerning your good name — "

"And believe them," broke in Irene, with angry impatience.

"I have said nothing as to belief or disbelief. The rumor is grave enough."

"And you have illustrated your faith in the slander — beautifully, befittingly, generously!"

"Irene!"

"Generously, as a man who knew his wife. Ah, well!" This last ejaculation was made almost lightly — but it involved great *bitterness* of spirit.

"Do not speak any longer after this fashion," said Hartley, with considerable irritation of manner; "it doesn't suit my present temper. I want something in a very different spirit. The matter is of too serious import. So please lay aside your *trifling*. I came to you as I had a right to come, and made inquiries concerning your associations when not in my company. Your answers are not satisfactory — but tend rather to con . . ."

"Sir!" Irene interrupted him in a stern, deep voice, which came so suddenly that the word remained unspoken. Then, raising her finger in a warning manner, she said with threatening,

"Beware!"

For some moments they stood looking at each other, more like two animals at bay — than husband and wife.

"Concerning my associations when not in your company?" said Irene at length, repeating his language slowly.

"Yes," answered the husband.

"Concerning, my associations? Well, Hartley — so far, I say well." She was *collected* in manner and her voice steady. "But what concerning *your* associations when not in my company?"

The very novelty of this interrogation caused Hartley to startle and change color.

"*Ha!*" The blood leaped to the forehead of Irene, and her eyes, dilating suddenly, almost glared upon the face of her husband.

"Well, sir?" Irene drew her slender form to its utmost height. There was an impatient, *demanding* tone in her voice. "Speak!" she added, without change of manner. "What concerning *your* associations when not in my company? As a wife, I have some interest in this matter. Away from home often until the brief hours — have I no right to put the question — where and with whom? It would seem so — if we are *equal*. But if I am the *slave* and *dependant* — the *creature of your will and pleasure* — why, that alters the case!"

Hartley was recovering from his surprise — but not gaining clear sight or prudent self-possession.

"You have not answered," said Irene, looking coldly — but with glittering eyes, into his face. "Come! If there is to be a mutual relation of acts and associations outside of this our home — let us begin. Sit down, Hartley, and compose yourself. You are the *man*, and claim precedence. I yield the prerogative. So let me have your confession. After you have ended — then I will give as faithful a narrative as if on my death-bed. What more can you ask? There now, lead the way!"

This *coolness*, which but thinly veiled a *contemptuous* air, irritated Hartley almost beyond the bounds of decent self-control.

"*Well acted!*" he retorted with a sneer.

"You do not accept the proposal," said Irene, growing a little sterner of aspect. "Very well. I scarcely hoped that you would meet me on this *even ground*. Why should I have hoped it? Were the antecedents encouraging? No! But I am sorry. Ah, well! *Husbands* are free to go and come at their own sweet will — to associate with anybody and everybody. But *wives* — oh dear!"

She tossed her head in a wild, scornful way, as if on the verge of being swept

from her feet by some whirlwind of passion.

"And so," said her husband, after a long silence, "you do not choose to answer my questions as to Major Willard?"

That was unwisely pressed. In her heart of hearts, Irene *loathed* this man. His *name* was an offence to her. Never, since the night he had forced himself into her carriage, had she even looked into his face. If he appeared in the room where she happened to be, she did not permit her eyes to rest upon his detested countenance. If he drew near to her, she did not seem to notice his presence. If he spoke to her, as he had ventured several times to do — she paid no regard to him whatever. So far as any response or manifestation of feeling on her part was concerned — it was as if his voice had not reached her ears. The very thought of this man, was a foul thing in her mind. No wonder that the repeated reference by her husband was felt as a stinging insult.

"If you dare to mention that name again in connection with mine," she said, turning almost fiercely upon him, "I will . . ."

She caught the words and held them back in the silence of her wildly reeling thoughts.

"Say on!"

Hartley was cool — but not rational. It was madness to press his excited young wife now. Had he lost sense and discrimination? Could he not see, in her strong, womanly indignation, the signs of innocence? Fool! fool! to thrust sharply at her now!

"My father!" came in a sudden gush of strong feeling from the lips of Irene, as the thought of him whose name was thus ejaculated came into her mind. She struck her hands together, and stood like one in wild bewilderment. "My father!" she added, almost mournfully; "oh, that I had never left you!"

"It would have been better for you — and better for me!" retorted Hartley. No, he was not rational, or else would no such words have fallen from his lips.

Irene, with a slight startle and a slight change in the expression of her countenance, looked up at her husband:

"*You think so?*" Hartley was a little surprised at the way in which Irene put this interrogation. He looked for a different reply.

"I have said it," was his cold answer.

"Well." She said no more — but looked down and sat thinking for the space of

more than a minute.

"I will go back to Ivy Cliff then!" She looked up, with something strange in the expression of her face. It was a blank, unfeeling, almost unmeaning expression.

"Well!" It was Hartley's only response.

"Well — and that is all?" Her tones were so chilling that they came over the spirit of her husband like the low waves of an icy wind.

"No, that is not all." What evil spirit was blinding his perceptions? What evil influence pressing him on to the brink of ruin?

"Say on!" How strangely cold and calm she remained! "Say on!" she repeated. Was there none to warn him of danger?

"If you go a third time to your father . . ." He paused.

"Well?" There was not a quiver in her low, clear, icy tone.

"You must do it with your eyes open, and in full view of the *consequences*."

"What are the consequences?"

Beware, rash man! Put a seal on your lips! Do not let the thought so sternly held, find even a shadow of utterance!

"Speak, Hartley. What are the consequences?"

"You cannot return!" It was said without a quiver of feeling.

"Well." She looked at him with an unchanged countenance, steadily, coldly, piercingly.

"I have said the words, Irene — and they are no idle utterances. Twice you have left me — but you cannot do it a third time and leave a way open between us. Go, then, if you will; but, if we part here, it must be forever!"

The eyes of Irene dropped slowly. There was a slight change in the expression of her face. Her hands moved nervously, one within the other.

Forever! The words are rarely uttered without leaving on the mind a shadow of thought. Forever! They brought more than a simple shadow to the mind of Irene. A sudden darkness fell upon her soul, and for a little while she groped about like one who had lost her way. But her husband's threat of consequences, his cold, imperious manner, his assumed superiority, all acted as sharp spurs to her *pride*

— and she stood up, strong again, in full mental stature, with every power of her being in full force for action and endurance.

"I will go!" There was no sign of weakness in her voice. She had raised her eyes from the floor and turned them fully upon her husband. Her face was not so pale as it had been a little while before. Warmth had come back to the delicate skin, flushing it with beauty. She did not stand before him an impersonation of anger, dislike or rebellion. There was not a repulsive attitude or expression; no flashing of the eyes, seen a little while before. Slowly turning away, she left the room; but, to her husband, she seemed still standing there, a lovely vision. There had fallen, in that instant of time, a sunbeam which fixed the image upon his memory in imperishable colors. What though he parted company here with the vital form — that *effigy* would be, through all time, his inseparable companion!

"*Gone!*" Hartley held his breath as the word came into mental utterance. There was a motion of *regret* in his heart; a wish that he had not spoken quite so sternly — that he had kept back a part of the hard saying. But it was too late now. He could not, after all that had just passed between them — after she had refused to answer his questions concerning Major Willard — make any concessions. Come what would, there was to be no retracing of steps now.

"And it may as well be," said he, rallying himself, "that we *part* here. Our experiment has proved a sad failure. We grow *colder* and more *repellant* each day, instead of drawing closer together and becoming more lovingly assimilated. It is not good — this life — for either of us. We struggle in our chains — and hurt each other. Better apart! better apart! Moreover" — his face darkened — "she has fallen into dangerous companionship, and will not be *advised* or *governed*. I have heard her name fall lightly from lips that cannot utter a woman's name without leaving it soiled. She is *pure* now — as pure as snow. I have not a shadow of suspicion, though I pressed her close. But this *contact* is bad; she is breathing an *impure atmosphere*; she is consorting with some who are sensual and evil-minded, though she will not believe the truth. *Mrs. Lloyd!* Gracious heavens! My wife the intimate companion of *that* woman! Seen with her in Broadway! A constant visitor at my house! This — and I knew it not!"

Hartley grew deeply agitated as he rehearsed these things. It was after midnight when he retired. He did not go to his wife's room — but passed to a room other than that in which he usually slept.

Day was abroad when Hartley awoke the next morning, and the sun shining from an angle that showed him to be nearly two hours above the horizon. It was late for Hartley. Rising hurriedly, and in some confusion of thought, he went down stairs. His mind, as the events of the last evening began to adjust themselves, felt an increasing sense of oppression. *How* was he to meet Irene? or *was* he to meet her again? Had she relented? Had a night of sober reflection wrought any change? Would she take the step which he had warned her as a fatal one?

With such questions crowding upon him, Hartley went downstairs. In passing their chamber-door he saw that it stood wide open, and that Irene was not there. He descended to the parlors and to the sitting-room — but did not find her. The bell announced breakfast; he might find her at the table. No — she was not at her usual place when the morning meal was served.

"Where is Irene?" he asked of the servant.

"I have not seen her," was replied.

Hartley turned away and went up to their chambers. His footsteps had a desolate, echoing sound to his ears, as he bent his way there. He looked through the front and then through the back chamber, and even called, faintly, the name of his wife. But all was as still as death. Now a small envelope caught his eye, resting on a casket in which Irene had kept her jewelry. He lifted it, and saw his name inscribed thereon. The handwriting was not strange. He broke the seal and read these few words:

"I have gone. IRENE."

The narrow piece of tinted paper on which this was written, dropped from his nerveless fingers, and he stood for some moments still as if death-stricken, and as rigid as stone.

"Well," he said audibly, at length, stepping across the floor, "and so the *end* has come!"

He moved to the full length of the chamber and then stood still — turned, in a little while, and walked slowly back across the floor — stood still again, his face bent down, his lips closely shut, his finger-ends gripped into the palms.

"*Gone!*" He tried to shake himself free of the partial stupor which had fallen upon him. "*Gone!*" he repeated. "And so this *calamity* is upon us! She has dared the fatal leap! She has spoken the irrevocable decree! God help us both, for both have need of help; I and she — but she most. God help her to bear the *burden* she has lifted to her weak shoulders; she will find it a match for her strength. I shall go into the *world*, and bury myself in its cares and duties — I shall find, at least, in the long days, a compensation in work — earnest, absorbing, exciting work. But she? Poor Irene! The days and nights will be to her equally desolate. Poor Irene! Poor Irene!"

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