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After the Storm

The Palsied Heart

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Chapter 20.

The shock to Mr. Delancy was a fearful one, coming as it did on a troubled, foreboding state of mind; and *reason* lost for a little while her firm grasp on the rein of government. If the old man could have seen a *ray of hope* in the case, it would have been different. But from the manner and language of his daughter, it was plain that *the dreaded evil* had found them; and the certainty of this falling suddenly, struck him as with a heavy blow.

For several days, he was like one who had been stunned. All that afternoon on which his daughter returned to Ivy Cliff, he moved about in a bewildered way; and by his questions and remarks showed an incoherence of thought which filled the heart of Irene with alarm.

On the next morning, when she met him at the breakfast-table, he smiled on her in his old affectionate way. As she kissed him, she said,

"I hope you slept well last night, father?"

A slight change was visible in his face.

"I slept soundly enough," he replied, "but my *dreams* were not agreeable."

Then he looked at her with a slight closing of the brows and a questioning look in his eyes.

They sat down, Irene taking her old place at the table. As she poured out her father's coffee, he said, smiling,

"It is pleasant to have you sitting there, daughter."

"Is it?"

Irene was troubled by this old manner of her father. Could he have forgotten why

she was there?

"Yes, it is pleasant," he replied, and then his eye dropped in a thoughtful way.

"I think, sometimes, that your attractive New York friends have made you neglectful of your lonely old father. You don't come to see him as often as you did a year ago."

Mr. Delancy said this with simple earnestness.

"They shall not keep me from you any more, dear father," replied Irene, meeting his humor, yet heart-appalled at the same time with this evidence that his *mind* was wandering from the truth.

"I don't think them *safe* friends," added Mr. Delancy, with seriousness.

"Perhaps not," replied Irene.

"Ah! I'm glad to hear you say so. Now, you have *one* true, safe friend. I wish you loved her better than you do."

"What is her name?"

"Rose Carman," said Mr. Delancy, with a slight hesitation of manner, as if he feared repulsion on the part of his daughter.

"I love Rose, dearly; she is the best of girls; and I know her to be a true friend," replied Irene.

"Spoken like my own daughter!" said the old man with a brightening countenance. "You must not neglect her any more. Why, she told me you hadn't written to her in six months. Now, that isn't right. Never forget old, true friends — for the sake of new, and maybe false ones. No — no. Rose is hurt; you must write to her often — every week."

Irene could not answer. Her heart was beating wildly. What could this mean? Had reason fled? But she struggled hard to preserve a calm exterior.

"Will *Hartley* be up today?"

Irene tried to say "No," but could not find utterance.

Mr. Delancy looked at her curiously, and now in a slightly troubled way. Then he let his eyes fall, and sat holding his cup like one who was turning perplexed thoughts in his mind.

"You are not well this morning, father," said Irene, speaking only because *silence* was too oppressive for endurance.

"I don't know; perhaps I'm not very well;" and Mr. Delancy looked across the table at his daughter very earnestly. "I had *bad dreams* all last night, and they seem to have got mixed up in my thoughts with real things. How is it? When did you come up from New York? Don't smile at me — but really, I can't think."

"I came yesterday," said Irene, as calmly as she could speak.

"Yesterday!" He looked at her with a quickly changing face.

"Yes, father, I came up yesterday."

"And Rose was here?"

"Yes."

Mr. Delancy's eyes fell again, and he sat very still.

"Will *Hartley* be here today?"

Mr. Delancy did not look up as he asked this question.

"No, father."

"Nor tomorrow?"

"I think not."

A *sigh* quivered on the old man's lips.

"Nor the day after that?"

"He did not say *when* he was coming," replied Irene, evasively.

"Did not say when? Did not say when?" Mr. Delancy repeated the sentence two or three times, evidently trying all the while to recall something which had faded from his memory.

"Don't worry yourself about Hartley," said Irene, forcing herself to pronounce a name that seemed like fire on her lips. "Isn't it enough that *I* am here?"

"No, it is not enough." And her father put his hand to his forehead and looked upward in an earnest, searching manner.

What could Irene say? What could she do? The mind of her father was groping about in the dark, and she was every moment in dread, lest he should discover the truth and get farther deranged from the shock.

No food was taken by either Mr. Delancy or his daughter. The former grew more entangled in his thoughts, and finally arose from the table, saying, in a half-apologetic way,

"I don't know what ails me this morning."

"Where are you going?" asked Irene, rising at the same time.

"Nowhere in particular. The air is close here — I'll sit a while in the portico," he answered, and throwing open one of the windows he stepped outside. Irene followed him.

"How beautiful!" said Mr. Delancy, as he sat down and turned his eyes upon the attractive landscape. Irene did not trust her voice in reply.

"Now go in and finish your breakfast, child. I feel better; I don't know what came over me." He added the last sentence in an undertone.

Irene returned into the house — but not to resume her place at the table. Her mind was in an agony of *dread*. She had reached the dining-room, and was about to ring for a servant, when she heard her name called by her father. Running back quickly to the portico, she found him standing in the attitude of one who had been suddenly startled; his face all alive with question and suspense.

"Oh, yes! yes! I thought you were here this moment! And so it's all true?" he said, in a quick, troubled way.

"True? What is true, father?" asked Irene, as she paused before him.

"True, what you told me yesterday."

She did not answer.

"You have left your husband?" He looked soberly into her face.

"I have, father." She thought it best to use no evasion.

He groaned, sat down in the chair from which he had arisen, and let his head fall upon his bosom.

"Father!" Irene kneeled before him and clasped his hands. "Father! dear father!"

He laid a hand on her head, and smoothed her hair in a caressing manner.

"Poor child! poor daughter!" he said, in a fond, pitying voice, "don't take it so to heart. Your old father loves you still."

She could not halt the wild rush of feeling that was overmastering her. Passionate sobs heaved her breast, and tears came raining from her eyes.

"Now, don't, Irene! Don't carry on so, daughter! I love you still, and we will be happy here, as in other days."

"Yes, father," said Irene, holding down her head and calming her voice, "we will be happy here, as in the dear old time. Oh we will be very happy together. I won't leave you any more."

"I wish you had never left me," he answered, mournfully; "I was always afraid of this — always afraid. But don't let it break your heart; I'm all the same; nothing will ever turn me against you. I hope *he* hasn't been very unkind to you?" His voice grew a little severe.

"We won't say anything against him," replied Irene, trying to understand exactly her father's state of mind and accommodate herself thereto. "*Forgive and forget* is the wisest rule always."

"Yes, dear, that's it. Forgive and forget — forgive and forget. There's nothing like it in this world. I'm glad to hear you talk so."

The shock received when the news first came upon him with stunning force, had taken away his keen perception of the calamity. He was sad, troubled and restless, and talked a great deal about the unhappy position of his daughter — sometimes in a way that indicated much *incoherence* of thought. To this state, followed one of almost total silence, and he would sit for hours in apparent dreamy listlessness — if not aroused from reverie and inaction by his daughter. His conversation, when he did talk on any subject, showed, however, that his mind had regained its old clearness.

On the third day after Irene's arrival at Ivy Cliff, her trunks came up from New York. She had packed them on the night before leaving her husband's house, and marked them with her name and that of her father's residence. No *letter* or *message* accompanied them. She did not expect nor desire any communication, and was not therefore disappointed — but rather relieved from what would have only proved another cause of disturbance. All angry feelings toward her husband had subsided; but no tender impulses moved in her heart, nor did the feeblest thought of *reconciliation* breathe over the surface of her mind. She had been in *chains* — now the *fetters* were cast off, and she loved *freedom* too well to bend her neck again to the *yoke*.

No tender impulses moved, we have said, in her heart, for it lay like a palsied thing, dead in her bosom — dead, we mean, so far as the wife was concerned. It was not so palsied on that fatal evening when the last strife with her husband closed. But in the agony that followed, there came, in mercy, a cold paralysis; and now toward Hartley — her feelings were as calm as the surface of a frozen lake.

And how was it with the deserted husband? Stern and unyielding also. The past year had been marked by so little of mutual tenderness, there had been so few passages of love between them — so few *green spots* in the *desert* of their lives — that memory brought hardly a loving relic from the past, over which the heart could brood. For the sake of worldly appearances, Hartley most regretted the unhappy event. Next, his trouble was for Irene and her father — but most for Irene.

"Willful, wayward one!" he said many, many times. "You, of all, will suffer most. No woman can take a step like this — without drinking of pain to the bitterest dregs. If you can hide the anguish, well. But I fear the trial will be too hard for you — the *burden* too heavy. Poor, mistaken one!"

For a month the household arrangements of Hartley continued as when Irene left him. He did not intermit for a day or an hour, his business duties, and came home regularly at his usual times — always, it must be said, with a feeble *expectation* of meeting his wife in her old place; we do not say *desire* — but simply *expectation*. If she had returned, well. He would not have repulsed, nor would he have received her with strong indications of pleasure. But a month went by, and she did not return nor send him any word. Beyond the brief *"I have gone,"* there had come no sign from her.

Two months elapsed, and then Hartley dismissed the servants and shut up the house — but he neither removed nor sold the furniture; that remained as it was for nearly a year, when he ordered a sale by auction, and closed the house.

Hartley, under the influence of business and domestic trouble, matured rapidly, and became grave, silent and reflective beyond men of his years. He was *social* by nature, and during the last year that Irene was with him, failing to receive social sympathy at home — he had joined a club of young men, whose association was based on an ambition for *literary excellence*. From this club, he withdrew himself; it did not meet the needs of his higher nature — but offered much that stimulated the grosser appetites and passions.

Now he gave himself up to earnest self-improvement, and found in the higher and wider range of thought, which came as the result a partial compensation for what he had lost. But he was not happy; far, very far from it. And there were seasons when the *past* came back upon him in such a flood, that all the barriers

of indifference which he had raised for self-protection, were swept away, and he had to build them up again in sadness of spirit. So the time wore on with him, and troubled life-experiences were doing their work upon his character.