

## After the Storm: The Irrevocable Decree

By [Timothy Shay Arthur](#)

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### Chapter 21.

It is *two years* since the day of separation between Irene and her husband. Just two years. And she is sitting in the portico at Ivy Cliff with her father, looking down upon the river that lies gleaming in sunshine — not thinking of the river, however, nor of anything in nature.

They are silent and still — very still, as if *sleep* had locked their senses. He is thin and wasted as from long sickness, and she looks older by ten years. There is no fine bloom on her cheeks, from which the fullness of youth has departed.

It is a warm June day, the softest, balmiest, brightest day the year has given. The air comes laden with delicate *fragrances* and thrilling with bird *melodies*, and, turn the eye as it will, there is a *feast of beauty*.

Yet, the *fragrances* are not perceived, nor the *music* heard, nor the *beauty* seen by that musing old man and his silent daughter. Their thoughts are not in the present — but far back in the *unhappy past*, the memories of which, awakened by the scene and season, have come flowing in a strong tide upon them.

Two years! They have left the *prints* of their heavy feet upon the life of Irene — and the deep marks will never be wholly obliterated. She were less than human if this were not so. Two years! Yet, not once in that long, heart-aching time — had she for a single moment looked backward in *weakness*. Sternly holding to her prior actions as right, she strengthened herself in suffering, and bore her pain, as if it were a decree of fate. There was no *anger* in her heart, nor anything of *hardness* toward her husband. But there was no *love*, nor tender yearning for reunion — at least, nothing recognized as such, in her own consciousness.

Not since the days Irene left the house of her husband, had she heard from him directly; and only two or three times indirectly. She had never visited the city since her flight therefrom, and all her pleasant and strongly influencing *associations* there, were, in consequence, at an end.

Once her very dear friend *Mrs. Talbot* came up to sympathize with and

strengthen her in the *fiery trial* through which she was passing. She found Irene's truer friend, Rosa Carman, with her; and Rose did not leave them alone for a moment at a time. All sentiments that she regarded as hurtful to Irene in her present state of mind — she met with her calm, conclusive mode of reasoning, that took away the specious force of the sophist's dogmas. But her influence was chiefly used in the repression of unprofitable themes, and the introduction of such as tended to tranquilize the feelings, and turn the thoughts of her friend away from the trouble that was lying upon her soul like a *suffocating nightmare*. Mrs. Talbot was not pleased with her visit, and did not come again.

But she wrote several times. The tone of her letters was not, however, pleasant to Irene, who was disturbed by it, and more bewildered than enlightened by the sentiments that were announced with oracular vagueness. These letters were read to Miss Carman, on whom Irene was beginning to *lean* with increasing confidence. Rose did not fail to expose their weakness or fallacy in such clear light that Irene — though she tried to shut her eyes against the truth presented by Rose, could not help seeing it. Her *replies* to Mrs. Talbot were not, under these circumstances, very satisfactory, for she was unable to speak in a free, assenting, confiding spirit. The consequence was natural. Mrs. Talbot ceased to write, and Irene did not regret the broken correspondence.

Once *Mrs. Lloyd* wrote. When Irene broke the seal and let her eyes rest upon the signature, a *shudder of repulsion* ran through her frame, and the letter dropped from her hands to the floor. As if possessed by a spirit whose influence over her she could not control, she caught up the unread sheet and threw it into the fire! As the flames seized upon and consumed it, she drew a long breath and murmured,

"So perish the memory of our acquaintance!"

Those two years had brought great suffering. There are no happy events to record, and but little progress to state. Yes, there had been a dead level of suffering — a *palsied condition of heart and mind*; a period of almost sluggish endurance, in which *pride* and an *indomitable will* gave strength to bear.

Mr. Delancy and his daughter were sitting, as we have seen, on that sweet June day, in silent abstraction of thought, when the serving-man, who had been to the village, stepped into the portico and handed Irene a letter. The sight of it caused her heart to leap and the blood to crimson suddenly her face. It was not an ordinary letter — one in such a shape had never come to her hand before.

"What is that?" asked her father, coming back as it were to life.

"I don't know," she answered, with an effort to appear indifferent.

Mr. Delancy looked at his daughter with a perplexed manner, and then let his

eyes fall upon the *legal envelope* in her hand, on which a large red seal was impressed.

Rising in a quiet way, Irene left the portico with slow steps; but no sooner was she beyond her father's observation than she moved toward her chamber with winged feet.

"Bless me, Miss Irene!" exclaimed Margaret, who met her on the stairs, "what has happened?"

But Irene swept by her without a response, and, entering her room, shut the door and locked it. Margaret stood a moment irresolute, and then, going back to her young lady's chamber, knocked for admission. There was no answer to her summons, and she knocked again.

"Who is it?"

She hardly knew the voice.

"It is Margaret. Can't I come in?"

"Not now," was answered.

"What's the matter, Miss Irene?"

"Nothing, Margaret. I wish to be *alone* now."

"Something has happened, though, or you'd never look just like that," said Margaret to herself, as she went slowly downstairs. "Oh dear, dear! Poor child! there's nothing but *trouble* for her in this world!"

It was some minutes before Irene found courage to break the imposing seal and look at the communication within. She guessed at the contents, and was not wrong. They informed her, in legal phrase, that her husband had filed an application for a *divorce* on the ground of desertion, and gave notice that any resistance to this application must be on file on or before a certain date.

The only visible sign of *feeling* that responded to this announcement, was a deadly paleness and a slight, nervous crushing of the paper in her hands. Motionless as a thing inanimate, she sat with fixed, dreamy eyes for a long, long time.

A divorce! She had thought on this daily, for more than a year, and often wondered at her husband's tardiness. Had she desired it? Ah, that is the probing question. Had she desired an act of law to push them fully asunder — to make the separation complete in all respects? No! She did not really wish for the

*irrevocable* sundering decree.

Since her return to her father's house, the whole life of Irene had been marked by great circumspection. The trial through which she had passed was enough to sober her mind, and turn her thoughts in some new directions; and this result had followed. *Pride*, *self-will*, and impatience of *control* — no longer found any spur to react to — and so her interest in woman's rights, social reforms and all their concomitants died away. At first there had been warm arguments with Miss Carman on these subjects — but these grew gradually less earnest, and were finally avoided by both, as not only unprofitable — but distasteful. Gradually this *wise* and *true friend* had quickened in the mind of Irene, an interest in things outside of herself. There are in every neighborhood objects to awaken our sympathies, if we will only look at and think of them. "The *poor* you have always with you." Not the physically poor only, but, in larger numbers, the mentally and spiritually poor. The hands of no one need lie idle a moment for lack of work, for it is no vague form of speech, to say that the harvest is great and the laborers few.

There were ripe harvest-fields around Ivy Cliff, though Irene had not observed the *golden grain* bending its head for the sickle — until Rose led her feet in the right direction. Not many of the *physically* poor were around them, yet some required even bodily ministrations — children, the sick and the aged. The destitution that most prevailed was of the *mind* — and this is the saddest form of poverty. Mental hunger! how it exhausts the soul and debases its heaven-born faculties, sinking it into a gross material sphere, that is only a little removed from the animal! To feed the hungry and clothe the naked, mean a great deal more than the bestowal of food and clothing; yes, a great deal more; and we have done but a small part of Christian duty — have obeyed only in the letter — when we supply merely the bread which perishes.

Rose Carman had been wisely instructed, and she was an apt scholar. Now, from a learner — she became a teacher, and in the suffering Irene, found one ready to accept the higher truths that governed her life, and to act with her in giving them a real momentum. So, in the two years which had woven their web of new experiences for the heart of Irene — she had been drawn almost imperceptibly by Rose into fields of labor where the work that left her hands was, she saw, good work, and must endure forever. What *peace* it often brought to her striving spirit, when — but for the sustaining and protecting power of good deeds, she would have been swept out upon the waves of turbulent passion — tossed and beaten there until her exhausted heart sunk down amid the waters, and lay dead for a while at the bottom of her *great sea of trouble!*

It was better — oh, how much better! — when she laid her head at night on her lonely pillow, to have in memory, the face of a poor sick woman, which had changed from suffering to peace as she talked to her of higher things than the body's needs, and bore her mind up into a region of tranquil thought — than to be

left with no image to dwell upon but an image of *her own shattered hopes*. Yes, this was far better; and by the power of such memories, the unhappy one had many peaceful seasons and nights of sweet repose.

All around Ivy Cliff, Irene and Rose were known as *ministering spirits* to the poor and destitute. The father of Rose was a man of wealth, and she had his entire sympathy and encouragement. Irene had no regular duties at home, Margaret being housekeeper and directress in all departments. So there was nothing to hinder her free course, as to the employment of time.

With all her *pride of independence*, the ease with which Mrs. Talbot drew Irene in one direction, and now Miss Carman in another — showed how easily she might be influenced when off her guard. This is true in most cases of your very self-willed people, and the reason why so many of them get astray. Only *conceal the hand* that leads them — and you may often take them where you desire. Ah, if Hartley had been *wise* enough, *prudent* enough and *loving* enough to have influenced aright the fine young spirit he was seeking to make one with his own — how different would the result have been!

In the region round about, our two young friends came in time to be known as the "*Sisters of Charity*." It was not said of them mockingly, nor in mirthful depreciation, nor in meanness — but in expression of a common sentiment, that recognized their high, self-imposed mission.

Thus it had been with Irene, since her return to the old home at Ivy Cliff.

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