

After the Storm

The Haunted Vision

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Chapter 23

Gradually the mind of Irene attained clearness of perception as to duty, and a firmness of will that led her to act in obedience to what reason and religion taught her was right. The leading idea which Rose endeavored to keep before her was this: that no happiness is possible, except in some *work* that removes *self-consciousness* and fills our minds with an interest in the well-being of others. While Rose was at Ivy Cliff, Irene acted with her, and was sustained by her love and companionship. After her marriage and removal to New York, Irene was left to stand alone, and this tried her strength. It was feeble. The sickness and death of her father drew her back again *into herself*, and for a time extinguished all interest in what was in the outside world. To awaken a new and higher life was the aim of her friend, and she never wearied in her generous efforts. During this winter, plans were matured for *active usefulness* in the old spheres, and Rose promised to pass as much time in the next summer with her father as possible, so as to act with Irene in the development of these schemes.

The first warm days of summer found Irene back again in her home at Ivy Cliff. Her visit in New York had been prolonged far beyond the limit assigned to it in the beginning — but Rose would not consent to an earlier return. This winter of daily life with Rose, in the unreserved fellowship of home, was of great use to Irene. *Affliction* had *mellowed* all the harder portions of her disposition — which the experiences of the past few years could not reach with their softening influences. There was *good soil* in her mind, well prepared, and the sower did not fail in the work of scattering good seed upon it with a liberal hand — seed that felt soon a quickening life and swelled in the delight of coming germination.

It is not our purpose to record the history of Irene during the years of her discipline at Ivy Cliff, where she lived, nun-like, for the larger part of her time. She had useful work there, and in its faithful performance, peace came to her troubled soul. Three or four times every year she paid a visit to Rose, and spent on each occasion from one to three or four weeks. It could not but happen that in these visits, congenial friendship would be made, and tender remembrances go back with her into the seclusion of her country home, to remain as sweet companions

in her hours of loneliness.

It was something remarkable that, during the six or seven years which followed Irene's separation from her husband, she had never seen him. He was still a resident of New York, and well known as a rapidly advancing member of the bar. Occasionally his name met her eyes in the newspapers, as connected with some important suit; but, beyond this, his life was to her a dead letter. He might be married again, for all she knew to the contrary. But she never dwelt on that thought; its intrusion always *disturbed* her, and that profoundly.

And how was it with Hartley? Had he again tried the *marriage experiment* which once so signally failed? No; he had not ventured upon the *sea* whose depths held the richest vessel he had freighted in life. Visions of loveliness had floated before him, and he had been lured by them, a few times, out of his beaten path. But he carried in his memory a *picture* that, when his eyes turned inward, held their gaze so fixedly that all other images grew dim or unlovely. And so, with a sigh, he would turn again to the old way and move on as before.

But the past was irrevocable. "And shall I," he began to say to himself, "for this *one great error* of my youth — this *blind mistake* — live a desolate and fruitless life?"

Oftener and oftener the question was repeated in his thoughts, until it found answer in an emphatic *No!* Then he looked around with a new interest, and went more into society. Soon one fair face came more frequently before the eyes of his mind, than any other face. He saw it as he sat in his law-office, saw it on the page of his book as he read in the evening, lying over the printed words and hiding from his thoughts their meaning; saw it in dreams. *The face* haunted him. How long was this since that fatal night of discord and separation? Ten years! So long? Yes, so long. Ten weary years had made their record upon his book of life and upon hers. Ten weary years! The discipline of this time had not worked on either any moral deterioration. Both were yet sound to the core, and both were building up solid *characters* based on the broad foundations of *virtue*.

Steadily that face grew into a more living distinctness, haunting his daily thoughts and nightly visions. Then new life-pulses began to throb in his heart; new emotions to tremble over its long calm surface; new warmth to flow, spring-like, into the indurated soil. This face, which had begun thus to dwell with him, was the face of a maiden, beautiful to look upon. He had met her often during a year, and from the beginning of their acquaintance, she had interested him. If he erred not, the interest was mutual. From all points of view, he now commenced studying her character. Having made one mistake, he was fearful and guarded. Better go on a lonely man to the end of life — than again have his love-freighted bark buried in mid-ocean!

At last, Hartley was satisfied. He had found the sweet being whose life could

blend in eternal oneness with his own; and it only remained for him to say to her in words, what she had read as plainly as written language in his eyes. So far as she was concerned, no impediment existed. We will not say that she was ripe enough in soul to wed with this man, who had passed through experiences of a kind that always develop the character broadly and deeply. No, for such was not the case. She was too young and inexperienced to understand him; too narrow in her range of thought; too much a *child*. But something in her beautiful, innocent, sweet young face had won his heart; and in the weakness of passion, not in the manly strength of a deep love — he had bowed down to a *shrine* at which he could never worship and be satisfied.

But even strong men are *weak* in woman's toils — and Hartley was a captive.

There was to be a pleasure-party on one of the steamers that cut the bright waters of the fair Hudson, and Hartley and the maiden, whose face was now his daily companion, were to be of the number. He felt that the time had come for him to speak, if he meant to speak at all — to say what was in his thought, or turn aside and let another woo and win the lovely being imagination had already pictured as the sweet companion of his future home.

The night that preceded this excursion, was a sleepless one for Hartley. Questions and doubts, scarcely defined in his thoughts before, pressed themselves upon him and demanded a solution. The past came up with a vividness not experienced for years. In states of semi-consciousness — half-sleeping, half-waking — there returned to him such life-like realizations of events long ago recorded in his memory, and covered over with the dust of time, that he startled from them to full wakefulness, with a heart throbbing in wild tumult.

Once there was presented so vivid a picture of *Irene*, that for some moments he was unable to satisfy himself that all these ten years of loneliness were not a dream. He saw her as she stood before him on that ever-to-be-remembered night and said, "*I go!*" Let us turn back and read the record of her appearance as he saw her then and now:

"She had raised her eyes from the floor, and turned them fully upon her husband. Her face was not so pale. Warmth had come back to the delicate skin, flushing it with beauty. She did not stand before him as an impersonation of anger, dislike or rebellion. There was not a repulsively attitude or expression. No flashing of the eyes, nor even the cold glitter 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."

Hartley groaned as he fell back upon his pillow and shut his eyes. What would he not then have given, for one full *draught of forgetfulness*.

Morning came at last, its bright beams dispersing the shadows of night; and with it came back the warmth of his new passion and his purpose on that day, if the opportunity came, to end all doubt, by offering the maiden his *hand* — we do not say *heart*, for of that he was not the full possessor.

The day opened charmingly, and the pleasure-party was on the wing early. Hartley felt a sense of exhilaration as the steamer passed out from her moorings and glided with easy grace along the city front. He stood upon her deck with a maiden's hand resting on his arm, the touch of which, though light as the pressure of a flower, was felt with *strange distinctness*. The shadows of the night, which had brooded so darkly over his spirit, were gone, and only a dim remembrance of the gloom remained. Onward the steamer glided, sweeping by the crowded line of buildings and moving grandly along, through palisades of rock on one side, and picturesque landscapes on the other, until bolder scenery stretched away, and mountains of clouds raised themselves against the blue horizon.

There was a large number of passengers on board, scattered over the decks or lingering in the cabins, as inclination prompted. The observer of faces and character had field enough for study; but Hartley was not inclined to read in the *book of character* on this occasion. One subject occupied his thoughts, to the exclusion of all others. There had come a period that was full of interest and fraught with momentous consequences, which must extend through all of his after years. He saw little but the *maiden* at his side — thought of little but his purpose to ask her to walk with him, a soul-companion, in the *journey of life*.

During the first hour there was a constant moving to and fro and the taking up of new positions by the passengers — a hum and buzz of conversation — laughing — exclamations — mirthful talk and enthusiasm. Then a *quieter tone* prevailed. Solitary individuals took places of observation; groups seated themselves in pleasant circles to chat, and couples drew away into cabins or retired places, or continued the promenade.

Among the latter were Hartley and his companion. Purposely he had drawn the fair girl away from their party, in order to get the opportunity he desired. He did not mean to startle her with an abrupt proposal here, in the very eye of observation — but to advance toward the object by slow approaches, marking well the effect of his words, and receding the moment he saw that, in beginning to comprehend him, her mind showed repulsion or marked disturbance.

Thus it was with them, when the boat swept onward with wind-like speed. They were in one of the gorgeously furnished cabins, sitting together on a sofa. There had been earnest talk — but on some subject of taste. Gradually Hartley changed the theme and began approaching the one nearest to his heart. Slight embarrassment followed; his voice took on a different tone; it was lower, tenderer, more deliberate and impressive. He leaned closer, and the maiden did

not withdraw; she understood him, and was waiting the pleasure of his speech with heart-throbbings that seemed as if they must be audible in his ears, as well as her own.

The time had come. Everything was favorable. The words that would have sealed his fate and hers, were on his lips, when, looking up, he knew not why — but under an impulse of the moment, he met *two calm eyes* resting upon him with an expression that sent the blood leaping back to his heart. Two calm eyes and a pale, calm face were before him for a moment; then they vanished in the crowd. But he knew them, though *ten years* lay between the last vision and this.

The words that were on his lips died unspoken. He could not have uttered them if life or death hung on the outcome. No — no — no! A dead silence followed.

"Are you ill?" asked his companion, looking at him anxiously.

"No, oh no," he replied, trying to rally himself.

"But you are ill, Hartley. How pale your face is!"

"It will pass off in a moment." He spoke with an effort to appear self-possessed. "Let us go back on deck," he added, rising. "There are a great many people in the cabin, and the atmosphere is oppressive."

A dead weight fell upon the maiden's heart as she arose and went on deck by the side of Hartley. She had noticed his sudden pause and glance across the cabin, at the instant she was holding her breath for his next words — but did not observe the object, a sight of which had wrought on him so remarkable a change. They walked nearly the entire length of the boat, after getting on deck, before Hartley spoke. He then remarked on the beauty of the scenery and pointed out interesting localities — but in so *absent* and *preoccupied* a way, that his companion listened without replying.

In a little while, he managed to get into the vicinity of three or four of their party, with whom he left her, and, moving away, took a position on the upper deck just over the gangway from which the landings were made. Here he remained until the boat came to at a pier on which his feet had stepped lightly many, many times. *Ivy Cliff* was only a little way distant, hidden from view by a belt of forest trees. The ponderous boat stood still, the plunging wheels stopped their muffled roar, and in the brooding silence that followed, three or four people stepped on the plank which had been thrown out and passed to the shore.

A *single form* alone fixed the eyes of Hartley. He would have known it on the instant among a thousand. It was that of *Irene!* Her step was slow, like one abstracted in mind or like one in feeble health. After gaining the landing, she stood still and turned toward the boat, when their eyes met again — met, and

held each other, by a spell which neither had power to break. The anchors were thrown off, the engineer rung his bell; there was a clatter of machinery, a rush of waters — and the boat glanced onward. Then Irene startled like one suddenly aroused from sleep and walked rapidly away.

And thus they met for the first time after a separation of ten years!

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