

After the Storm

The Ministering Angel

By [Timothy Shay Arthur](#)

1868

Chapter 24.

A clatter of machinery, a rush of waters, and the boat glanced onward — but still Hartley stood motionless and statue-like, his eyes fixed upon the shore, until the swiftly-gliding vessel bore him away, and the object which had held his vision by a kind of fascination was concealed from view.

"An *angel*, if there ever was one on this side of Heaven!" said a voice close to his ear. Hartley gave a startle and turned quickly. A man plainly dressed stood beside him. He was of middle age, and had a mild, grave, thoughtful countenance.

"Of *whom* do you speak?" asked Hartley, not able entirely to veil his surprise.

"Of the lady we saw go ashore at the landing just now. She turned and looked at us. You could not help noticing her."

"Who is she?" asked Hartley, and then held his breath awaiting the answer. The question was almost involuntary, yet prompted by a suddenly awakened desire to bear the *world's testimony* regard to Irene.

"You don't know her, then?" remarked the stranger.

"I asked who she was." Hartley intended to say this firmly — but his voice was unsteady. "Let us sit down," he added, looking around, and then leading the way to where some unoccupied chairs were standing. By the time they were seated, Hartley had gained the mastery over himself.

"You don't know her, then?" said the man, repeating his words. "She is well known about these parts, I can assure you. Why, that was old Mr. Delancy's daughter. Did you ever hear of her?"

"What about her?" was asked.

"Well, in the first place, she was married some ten or twelve years ago to a lawyer down in New York; and, in the second place, they didn't live very happily together — why, I never heard. I don't believe it was her fault, for she's the *sweetest, kindest, gentlest lady* it has ever been my good fortune to meet. Some people around Ivy Cliff call her '*the Angel*' — and the word has meaning in it as applied to her. She left her husband, and he got a divorce — but didn't charge anything wrong against her. That, I suppose, was more than he dared to do, for a *snow-flake* is not purer."

"You have lived in the neighborhood?" said Hartley, keeping his face a little averted.

"Oh yes, sir. I have lived about here pretty much all my life."

"Then you knew Miss Delancy before she was married?"

"No, sir; I can't say that I knew much about her before that time. I used to see her now and then as she rode about the neighborhood. She was a mirthful, wild girl, sir. But that *unhappy marriage* made a great change in her. I cannot forget the first time I saw her after she came back to her father's. She seemed to me older by many years than when I last saw her, and looked like one just recovered from a long and serious illness. The *brightness* had passed from her face, the *fire* from her eyes, the *spring* from her footsteps. I believe she left her husband of her own accord — but I never knew that she made any complaint against him. Of course, people were very *curious* to know why she had abandoned him. But her lips must have been sealed, for only a little vague talk went floating around. I never heard a breath of wrong charged against him as coming from her."

Hartley's face was turned still more away from his companion, his eyes bent down and his brows firmly knit. He did not ask farther — but the man was on a theme that interested him, and so continued.

"For most of the time since her return to Ivy Cliff, the life of Miss Delancy has been given to *Christian charities*. The death of her father was a heavy stroke. It took the life out of her for a while. Since her recovery from that shock, she has been constantly active among us in good deeds. Poor sick women know the touch of her gentle hand and the music of her voice. She has brought *sunlight* into many wintry homes, and kindled again on hearths long desolate — the fires of loving kindness. There must have been some lack of true appreciation on the part of her husband, sir. *Bitter fountains* do not send forth sweet waters like these. Don't you think so?"

"How would I know?" replied Hartley, a little coldly. The question was sprung upon him so suddenly that his answer was given in confusion of thought.

"We all have our opinions, sir," said the man, "and this seems a plain case. I've

heard it said that her husband was a hot-headed, self-willed, ill-regulated young fellow — no more fit to get married than to be President. That he didn't understand the *woman* — or, maybe, I should say *child* — whom he took for his wife is very certain, or he never would have treated her in the way he did!"

"How did he treat her?" asked Hartley.

"As to that," replied his talkative companion, "we don't know anything certain. But we shall not go far wrong in guessing that it was neither wise nor considerate. In fact, he must have outraged her terribly."

"This, I presume, is the common impression about Ivy Cliff?"

"No," said the man; "I've heard him well spoken of. The fact is, people are *puzzled* about the matter. We can't just understand it. But, I'm all on her side."

"I wonder that she has not married again?" said Hartley. "There are plenty of men who would be glad to wed so *perfect a being* as you represent her to be."

"She marry!" There was indignation and surprise in the man's voice.

"Yes — why not?"

"Sir, she is a *Christian* woman!"

"I can believe that, after hearing your testimony in regard to her," said Hartley. But he still kept his face so much turned aside, that its expression could not be seen.

"And reads her *Bible*."

"As we all should."

"And, what is more — she *believes* in it," said the man emphatically.

"Don't all Christian people believe in the Bible?" asked Hartley.

"I suppose so, after a fashion; and a very queer fashion it is, sometimes."

"How does this lady of whom you speak, believe in it differently from some others?"

"In this, that it *means* what it says on the subject of *divorce*."

"Oh, I understand. You think that if she were to marry again — it would be in the face of conscientious scruples?"

"I do."

Hartley was about asking another question, when one of the party to which he belonged joined him, and so the strange interview closed. He bowed to the man with whom he had been conversing, and then passed to another part of the boat.

With slow steps, that were *unsteady* from sudden weakness, *Irene* moved along the road that led to her home. After reaching the grounds of Ivy Cliff, she turned aside into a small summer-house, and sat down at one of the windows which looked out upon the river as it stretched upward in its gleaming way. The boat she had just left was already far distant — but it fixed her eyes, and they saw no other object until it passed from view around a wooded point of land. And still she sat motionless, looking at the spot where it had vanished from her sight.

"*Miss Irene!*" exclaimed Margaret, the faithful old servant, who still bore rule at the homestead, breaking in upon her *reverie*, "what in the world are you doing here? I expected you up today, and when the boat stopped at the landing and you didn't come — I was uneasy and couldn't rest. Why child, what is the matter? You're sick!"

"Oh no, Margaret, I'm well enough," said Irene, trying to smile indifferently. And she arose and left the summer-house.

Kind, observant old Margaret was far from being satisfied, however. She saw that Irene was not as when she departed for the city a week before. If she were not sick in body — then she was *troubled in her mind*, for her countenance was so changed that she could not look upon it without feeling a pang in her heart.

"I'm sure you're sick, Miss Irene," she said as they entered the house. "Now, what is the matter? What can I do or get for you? Let me send over for Dr. Edmondson?"

"No, no, my good Margaret, don't think of such a thing," replied Irene. "I'm *not* sick."

"Something's the matter with you, child," persisted Margaret.

"Nothing that won't cure itself," said Irene, trying to speak cheerfully. "I'll go up to my room for a little while."

And she turned away from her kind-hearted servant. On entering her chamber, Irene locked the door in order to be safe from intrusion, for she knew that Margaret would not let half an hour pass without coming up to ask how she was. Sitting down by the window, she looked out upon the river, along whose smooth surface had passed the vessel in which, a little while before, she met the man

once called by the name of *husband* — met him and looked into his face for the first time in ten long years! The meeting had disturbed her profoundly. In the cabin of that vessel, she had seen him by the side of a fair young girl in earnest conversation; and she had watched with a strange, fluttering interest the play of his features. What was he saying to that fair young girl — that she listened with such a breathless, waiting air? Suddenly he turned toward her, their eyes met and were spell-bound for moments. What did she read in his eyes in those brief moments? What did he read in hers? Both questions pressed themselves upon her thoughts as she retreated among the crowd of passengers, and then hid herself from the chance of another meeting until the boat reached the landing at Ivy Cliff. Why did she pause on the shore, and turn to look upon the crowded decks? She knew not. The act was involuntary. Again their eyes met — met and held each other until the receding vessel placed dim distance between them.

In less than half an hour, Margaret's hand was on the door — but she could not enter. Irene had not moved from her place at the window in all that time.

"Is that you, Margaret?" she called, startling from her abstraction.

"Do you need anything, Miss Irene?"

"No, thank you, Margaret."

She answered in as cheerful a tone as she could assume, and the kind old waiting-woman retired.

From that time, everyone noted a change in Irene. But none knew, or even guessed, its cause or meaning. Not even to her friend, Rose, did she speak of her meeting with Hartley. Her face did not light up as before, and her eyes seemed always as if looking inward or gazing dreamily upon something afar off. Yet in good deeds, she failed not. If her own heart was heavier, she made other hearts lighter by her presence.

And still the years went on in their steady revolutions — one, two, three, four, five more years — and in all that time the *parted ones* did not meet again.

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