

After the Storm

By Timothy Shay Arthur

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Chapter 28.

After the storm! How long the *treasure* remained buried in deep waters! How long the earth showed unsightly furrows and barren places! For nearly twenty years there had been warm sunshine, and no failure of the dews nor the early and latter rain. But grass had not grown nor flowers blossomed in the path of that desolating *tempest*. Nearly twenty years! If the *history* of these two lives during that long period could be faithfully written — it would flood the soul with tears.

Four years later than the time when we last presented Irene to the reader, we introduce her again. That meeting in the picture-gallery had disturbed profoundly the quiet pulses of her life. She did not observe Hartley's companion. The picture alone had attracted her attention; and she had just begun to feel its meaning, when an audible sigh reached her ears. The answering sigh was involuntary. Then they looked into each other's faces again — only for an instant — but with what a volume of mutual revelations!

It was four years after this time that Irene, after a brief visit in New York to her friend, Rose, returned to her rural home. Rose was to follow on the next day, and spend a few weeks with her father. It was yet in the early summer, and there were not many passengers on the boat. As was usual, Irene provided herself with a good book, and soon after going on board took a retired place in one of the cabins and buried herself in its pages. For over three hours she remained completely absorbed in what she was reading. Then her mind began to wander and dwell on themes that made the even pulses of her heart beat to a quicker measure; yet still her eyes remained fixed on the book she held in her hand. At length she became aware that someone was near her, by the falling of a shadow on the page she was trying to read. Lifting her head, she met the eyes of *Hartley!* He was standing close to her, his hand resting on the back of a chair, which he now drew nearly in front of her.

"Irene," he said, in a low, quiet voice, "I am glad to meet you again in this world." And he reached out his hand as he spoke.

For a moment Irene sat very still — but she did not take her eyes from Hartley's face; then she extended her hand and let it lie in his. He did not fail to notice that it had a little tremor.

Thus received, he sat down.

"Nearly twenty years have passed, Irene, since a word has passed between us."

Her lips moved — but there was no utterance.

"Why should we not, at least, be friends?"

Her lips moved again — but no words trembled on the air.

"Friends, that may meet now and then, and feel kindly one toward the other."

His voice was even in tone — very even — but very distinct and impressive.

At first Irene's face had grown pale — but now a warm flush was pervading it.

"If you desire it, Hartley," she answered, in a voice that trembled in the beginning — but grew firm before the sentence closed, "it is not for me to say, 'No.' As for kind feelings, they are yours always — always. The *bitterness* passed from my heart long ago."

"And from mine," said Hartley.

They were silent for a few moments, and each showed embarrassment.

"Nearly twenty years! That is a long, long time, Irene." His voice showed signs of weakness.

"Yes, it is a long time." It was a mere echo of his words, yet full of meaning.

"Twenty years!" he repeated. "There has been full time for *reflection*, and, it may be, for *repentance*. Time for growing wiser and better."

Irene's eyelids drooped until the long lashes lay in a dark fringed line on her pale cheeks. When she lifted them they were wet.

"Yes, Hartley," she answered with much feeling, "there has been, indeed, time for *reflection* and *repentance*. It is no light thing to *shadow* the whole life of a human being."

"As I have *shadowed* yours."

"No, no," she answered quickly, "I did not mean that; as I have shadowed yours."

She could not veil the tender interest that was in her eyes; would not, perhaps, if

it had been in her power.

At this moment a bell rang out clear and loud. Irene started and glanced from the window; then, rising quickly, she said —

"We are at the landing."

There was a hurried passage from cabin to deck, a troubled confusion of thought, a brief period of waiting, and then Irene stood on the shore and Hartley on the receding vessel. In a few hours, miles of space lay between them.

"Irene, darling," said Rose, as they met at Ivy Cliff on the next day, "how charming you look! This pure, sweet, bracing air has beautified you like a cosmetic. Your cheeks are warm and your eyes are full of light. It gives me gladness of heart to see in your face, something of the old look that faded from it years ago."

Irene drew her arm around her friend and kissed her lovingly.

"Come and sit down here in the library. I have something to tell you," she answered, "that will make your heart beat quicker, as it has mine."

"I have met *him*," she said, as they sat down and looked again into each other's faces.

"Him! Who?"

"Hartley!"

"Your husband?"

"He who *was* my husband. Met him face to face; touched his hand; listened to his voice; almost felt his heart beat against mine. Oh, Rose darling, it has sent the blood bounding in new life through my veins. He was on the boat yesterday, and came to me as I sat reading. We talked together for a few minutes, when our landing was reached, and we parted. But in those few minutes my poor heart had more happiness than it has known for twenty years. We are at peace. He asked why we might not be as friends who could meet now and then, and feel kindly toward each other? God bless him for the words! After a long, long *night of tears* — the *sweet morning* has broken!"

And Irene laid her head down against Rose, hiding her face and weeping from excess of joy.

"What a pure, true, manly face he has!" she continued, looking up with swimming eyes. "How full it is of thought and feeling! You called him *my husband* just now,

Rose. My husband!" The light went back from her face. "Not for time, but — " and she glanced upward, with eyes full of hope — "for the everlasting ages! Oh is it not a great gain to have met here in forgiveness of the past — to have looked kindly into each other's faces — to have spoken words that cannot die?"

What could Rose say to all this? Irene had carried her out of her *depth*. The even tenor of her life-experiences, gave no deep sea-line that could sound these waters. And so she sat silent, bewildered and half afraid.

Margaret came to the library, and, opening the door, looked in. There was a surprised expression on her face.

"What is it?" Irene asked.

"A gentleman has called, Miss Irene."

"A gentleman!"

"Yes, miss; and wants to see you."

"Did he send his name?"

"No, miss."

"Do you know him, Margaret?"

"I can't say, miss, for certain, but . . ." she stopped.

"But what, Margaret?"

"It may be just my thought, miss; but he looks for all the world as if he might be . . ."

She paused again.

"Well?"

"I can't say it, Miss Irene, no how, and I won't. But the gentleman asked for you. What shall I tell him?"

"That I will see him in a moment!" answered Irene.

Margaret retired.

The face of Irene, which flushed at first, now became pale as ashes. A wild hope trembled in her heart.

"Excuse me for a few minutes," she said to Rose, and, rising, left the room.

It was as Irene had supposed. On entering the parlor, a gentleman advanced to meet her, and she stood face to face with *Hartley!*

"Irene," he said, extending his hand.

"Hartley!" fell in an irrepressible throb from her lips, as she put her hand in his.

"I could not return to New York without seeing you again," said Hartley, as he stood holding the hand of Irene. "We met so briefly, and were thrown apart again so suddenly, that some things I meant to say were left unspoken."

He led her to a seat and sat down beside her, still looking intently in her face. Irene was far from being as calm as when they sat together the day before. A world of *new hopes* had sprung up in her heart since then. She had lain half asleep and half awake nearly all night, in a kind of *delicious dream*, from which the morning awoke her with a cold chill of reality. She had dreamed again since the sun had risen; and now the dream was changing into reality.

"Have I done wrong in coming to see you, Irene?" he asked.

And she answered,

"No, it is a pleasure to see you, Hartley."

She had passed through years of self-discipline, and the power acquired during this time came to her aid. And so she was able to answer with womanly dignity. It was a pleasure to meet him there — and she said so.

"There are some things in the past, Irene," said Hartley, "of which I must speak, now that I can do so. There are *confessions* that I wish to make. Will you hear me?"

"Better," answered Irene, "let the *dead past* bury its dead."

"I do not seek to justify *myself* — but *you*, Irene."

"You cannot alter the estimate I have made of my own conduct," she replied. "A *bitter stream* does not flow from a *sweet fountain*. That dead, dark, hopeless past! Let it *sleep* if it will!"

"And what, then, of the future?" asked Hartley.

"Of the future!" The question startled her. She looked at him with a glance of

eager inquiry.

"Yes, of the future, Irene. Shall it be as the past? or have we both come up *purified from the fire*? Has it consumed the *dross* — and left only the fine *gold*? I can believe it in your case — and hope that it is so in mine. But this I do know, Irene: after suffering and trial have done their work of *abrasion*, and I get down to the *pure metal* of my heart — I find that your image is fixed there in the imperishable substance. I did not expect to meet you again in this world as now — to look into your face, to hold your hand, to listen to your voice as I have done this day — but I have felt that God was fitting us through earthly trial, for a permanent union. We shall be one, dear Irene — one and forever!"

The strong man broke down. His voice fell into low sobs — tears blinded his vision. He groped about for the hand of Irene, found it, and held it passionately to his lips.

Was it for a loving woman to hold back coldly now? No, no, no! That were impossible.

"*My husband!*" she said, tenderly and reverently, as she placed her saintly lips on his forehead.

There was a touching *ceremony* at Ivy Cliff on the next day — one never to be forgotten by the few who were witnesses. A white-haired minister — the same who, more than twenty years before, had said to Hartley and Irene Delancy, "May your lives flow together like two pure streams which meet in the same valley" — again joined their hands and called them "husband and wife." The long, dreary, tempestuous *night* had passed away — and the *morning* arisen in brightness and beauty.

The End.

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