

After the Storm

The Cloud and the Sign

By Timothy Shay Arthur

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Chapter 3.

In alternating *storm* and *sunshine*, their lives passed on — until the appointed day arrived that was to see them bound, not by the *graceful true-lovers' knot*, which either might untie — but by a *chain* as light as downy fetters if borne in mutual love; and galling as ponderous iron links, if heart answered not heart, and the chafing spirit struggled to get free.

Hartley Emerson loved truly the beautiful, talented and affectionate, but badly-disciplined, quick-tempered, self-willed girl he had chosen for a wife. And Irene Delancy would have gone to prison and to death, for the sake of the man to whom she had yielded up the *rich treasures* of her young heart.

In both cases the great drawback to happiness, was the absence of self-discipline, self-denial and self-conquest. They could overcome difficulties, brave danger, set the world at defiance, if need be, for each other, and not a coward nerve give way. But when pride and disagreement came between them, each was a *child* in weakness, pride and blind self-will. Unfortunately, persistence of character was strong in both. They were of such stuff as martyrs were made of in the fiery times of power and persecution.

A brighter, purer morning than that on which their marriage vows were said — the year had not given to the smiling earth. Clear and softly blue as the eye of childhood — bent the summer sky above them. There was not a *cloud* in all the tranquil heavens to give suggestion of *dreary days* to come, or to wave a sign of warning. The blithe birds sung their morning melodies amid the branches that hung their leafy drapery around and above Irene's windows, in seeming echoes to the songs which love was singing in her heart. Nature put on the loveliest attire in all her ample wardrobe, and decked herself with wreaths of flowers, which loaded the air with sweetness.

"May your lives flow together like two pure streams that meet in the same valley; and as bright a sky bend always over you — as gives its serene promise for today."

Thus spoke the minister as the ceremonials closed that wrought the external bond of union between them. His words were uttered with feeling and solemnity; for marriage, in his eyes, was no light thing. He had seen too many sad hearts struggling in *chains* that only death could break, ever to regard marriage with other than sober thoughts that went questioning away into the future.

The "amen" of Mr. Delancy was not audibly spoken, but it was deep-voiced in his heart.

There was to be a honeymoon of a few weeks, and then the young couple were to take possession of a new home in the city, which Hartley had prepared for his bride. The earliest boat that came up from New York was to bear the party to Albany — Saratoga being the first point of their destination.

After the closing of the marriage ceremony, some two or three hours passed before the time of departure came. The warm congratulations were followed by a mirthful, festive scene, in which glad young hearts had a merry-making time. How beautiful the bride looked! and how proudly the gaze of her newly-installed husband turned ever and ever toward her, move which way she would among her maidens, as if she were a *magnet* to his eyes. He was standing in the portico that looked out upon the distant river, about an hour after the wedding, talking with one of the bridesmaids, when the latter, pointing to the sky, said, laughing —

"There comes your fate!"

Hartley's eyes followed the direction of her finger.

"You speak in riddles," he replied, looking back into the maiden's face. "What do you see?"

"A *little white blemish* on the deepening azure," was answered. "There it lies, just over that stately chestnut tree, whose branches arch themselves into the outline of a great cathedral window."

"A scarcely perceptible cloud?"

"Yes, no bigger than a hand; and just below it, is another."

"I see; and yet you still propound a *riddle*. What has that cloud to do with my fate?"

"You know the old superstition connected with wedding-days?"

"What?"

"That as the *aspect of the day* is — so will the wedded life be."

"Ours, then, is full of promise. There has been no fairer day than this," said the young man.

"Yet many a day that opened as bright and cloudless — has sobbed itself away in tears."

"True; and it may be so again. But I am no believer in *superstitions*."

"Nor I," said the young lady, again laughing.

The bride came up at this moment and, hearing the remark of her young husband, said, as she drew her arm within his —

"What about *superstitions*, Hartley?"

"Miss Rose Carman has just reminded me of the *superstition* about wedding-days, as typical of life."

"Oh yes, I remember," said Irene, smiling. "If the day opens *clear*, then becomes *cloudy*, and goes out in *storm* — there will be happiness in the beginning, but sorrow at the close; but if clouds and rain herald its awakening, then pass over and leave the sky blue and sunny — there will be trouble at first, but smiling peace as life progresses and declines. *Our sky* is bright as heart could wish." And the bride looked up into the deep blue ether.

Miss Carman laid one hand upon her arm and with the other pointed lower down, almost upon the horizon's edge, saying, in a tone of mock solemnity —

"As I said to Mr. Emerson, so I now say to you — There comes your fate."

"You don't call that the herald of an approaching storm?"

"Weather-wise people say," answered the maiden, "that a sky without a cloud is soon followed by stormy weather. Since morning until now there has not a cloud been seen."

"Weather-wise people and almanac-makers speak very oracularly, but the day of superstition is over," replied Irene.

"Science," said Hartley, "is beginning to find reasons in the nature of things, for results that once seemed only coincidental, yet followed with remarkable certainty the same phenomena. It discovers a relation of cause and effect, where ignorance only recognizes some power working in the dark."

"So you pass me over to the side of ignorance!" Irene spoke in a tone that Hartley's ear recognized too well. His remark had touched her *pride*.

"Not by any means," he answered quickly, eager to do away the impression. "Not by any means," he repeated. "The day of mere superstitions and omens is over. Whatever natural phenomena appear, are dependent on natural causes, and men of science are beginning to study the so-called superstitions of farmers and seamen, to find out, if possible, the philosophical elucidation. Already a number of curious results have followed investigation in this field."

Irene leaned on his arm still — but she did not respond. A *little cloud* had come up and lay just upon the verge of her *soul's* horizon. Her husband knew that it was there; and this knowledge caused a *cloud* to dim also the clear azure of his mind. There was a singular correspondence between their mental sky, and the fair azure without.

Fearing to pursue the theme on which they were conversing, lest some unwitting words might shadow still further the mind of Irene — Hartley changed the subject, and was, to all appearance, successful in dispelling the little cloud.

The hour came, at length, when the bridal party must leave. After a tender, tearful partings with her father, Irene turned her steps away from the home of her childhood into a new path, that would lead her out into the world, where so many thousands upon thousands, who saw only a way of *velvet softness* before them — have cut their tended feet upon flinty rocks, even to the very end of their tearful journey. Tightly and long did Mr. Delancy hold his child to his heart, and when his last kiss was given and his fervent "May God give you a happy life, my daughter!" said — he gazed after her departing form with eyes from which manly firmness could not hold back the tears.

No one knew better than Mr. Delancy the perils that lay before his daughter. That *storms* would darken her sky and desolate her heart — he had too good reason to fear. His hope for her lay beyond the *summer-time* of life, when, chastened by suffering and subdued by experience — a tranquil *autumn* would crown her soul with blessings that might have been earlier enjoyed. He was not superstitious, and yet it was with a feeling of concern that he saw the white and golden clouds gathering like enchanted land along the horizon, and piling themselves up, one above another, as if in sport, building castles and towers that soon dissolved, changing away into fantastic forms, in which the eye could see no meaning; and when, at last, his ear caught a far-distant sound that jarred the air, a sudden pain shot through his heart.

Like something instinct with life, the stately *steamer*, quivering with every stroke of her iron heart, swept along the gleaming river on her upward passage, bearing to their destination her freight of human souls. Among these was our bridal party, which, as the day was so clear and beautiful, was gathered upon the upper deck.

As Irene's eyes turned from the closing vision of her father's beautiful home, where the first cycle of her life had recorded its golden hours, she said, with a sigh, speaking to one of her companions —

"Farewell, Ivy Cliff! I shall return to you again — but not the same being I was when I left your pleasant scenes this morning."

"A happier being I trust," replied Miss Carman, one of her bridesmaids.

Rose Carman was a young friend, residing in the neighborhood of her father, to whom Irene was tenderly attached.

Irene responded, "Something here says *no*." And Irene, bending toward Miss Carman, lovingly pressed one of her hands against her.

"The weakness of an hour like this," answered her friend with an assuring smile. "It will pass away like the morning cloud and the early dew."

Hartley noticed the *shade* upon the face of his bride, and drawing near to her, said, tenderly —

"I can forgive you a *sigh for the past*, Irene. Ivy Cliff is a lovely spot, and your home has been all that a maiden's heart could desire. It would be strange, indeed, if the chords that have so long bound you there did not pull at your heart in parting."

Irene did not answer — but let her eyes turn backward with a pensive almost longing glance toward the spot where the distant trees the home of her early years, lay hidden among. A deep shadow had suddenly fallen upon her spirits. Whence it came, she knew not and asked not; but with the shadow was a *dim foreboding of evil*.

There was tact and delicacy enough in the companions of Irene to lead them to withdraw observation and to withhold further remarks until she could recover the self-possession she had lost. This came back in a little while, when, with an effort, she put on the light, easy manner so natural to her.

"Looking at the *signs* in the sky?" said one of the party, half an hour afterward, as she saw the eyes of Irene ranging along the sky, where clouds were now seen towering up in steep masses, like distant mountains.

"If I were a believer of signs," replied Irene, placing her arm within that of the maiden who had addressed her, and drawing her partly aside, "I might feel sober at this portent. But I am not. Still, sign or no sign, I trust we are not going to have a *storm*. It would greatly mar our pleasure."

But long before the boat reached Albany, rain began to fall, accompanied by lightning and thunder; and soon the clouds were dissolving in a mimic deluge. Hour after hour, the wind and rain and lightning held fierce revelry, and not until near the completion of the voyage, did the clouds hold back their watery treasures, and the sunbeams force themselves through the storm's dark barriers.

When the stars came out that evening, studding the heavens with light, there was no obscuring spot on all the overarching sky.

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