

After the Storm

Under the Cloud

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1868

Chapter 4

The wedding party was to spend a week at Saratoga, and it was now the third day since its arrival. The time had passed pleasantly, or wearily, according to the state of mind or social habits and resources of the individual. The bride, it was remarked by some of the party, seemed dull; and Rose Carman, who knew her friend better, perhaps, than any other individual in the company, and kept her under close observation, was concerned to notice an occasional *curtness of manner* toward her husband, that was evidently not relished. Something had already transpired to *jar the chords* so lately attuned to harmony.

After dinner, a ride was proposed by one of the company. Hartley responded favorably — but Irene was indifferent. He urged her, and she gave an evidently *reluctant* consent. While the gentlemen went to make arrangement for carriages, the ladies retired to their rooms. Miss Carman accompanied the bride. She had noticed her manner, and felt slightly troubled at her state of mind, knowing, as she did, her impulsive character and blind self-will when excited by *opposition*.

"I don't want to ride today!" exclaimed Irene, throwing herself into a chair as soon as she had entered her room; "and Hartley knows that I do not."

Her cheeks burned and her eyes sparkled.

"If it will give him pleasure to ride about," said Rose, in a gentle soothing manner, "you cannot but have the same feeling in accompanying him."

"I beg your pardon!" replied Irene, briskly. "If I don't want to ride — then no company can make the act agreeable. Why can't people learn to leave others in freedom? If Hartley had shown the same unwillingness to join this riding party that I manifested, do you think I would have uttered a second word in favor of going? No. I am *provoked* at his persistence."

"There, there, Irene!" said Miss Carman, drawing an arm tenderly around the neck of her friend; "don't trust such sentences on your lips. I can't bear to hear

you talk so. It isn't my sweet friend speaking."

"You are a dear, good girl, Rose," replied Irene, smiling faintly, "and I only wish that I had a portion of your calm, gentle spirit. But I am as I am — and must act out if I act at all. I must be myself, or nothing."

"You can be as considerate of others, as of yourself," said Rose.

Irene looked at her companion inquiringly.

"I mean," added Rose, "that you can exercise the virtue of *self-denial* in order to give pleasure to another — especially if that other one is an object very dear to you. As in the present case, seeing that your husband wants to join this riding party, you can, for his sake, lay aside your indifference, and enter, with a hearty good-will, into the proposed pastime."

"And why cannot he, seeing that I do not care to ride, deny himself a little for my sake, and not drag me out against my will? Is all the *yielding* and *concession* to be on *my* side? Must *his will* rule in everything? I can tell you what it is, Rose — this will never suit me. There will be open war between us before the honeymoon has waxed and waned, if he goes on as he has begun."

"Hush! hush, Irene!" said her friend, in a tone of entreaty. "The lightest sense of wrong gains undue magnitude, the moment we begin to *complain*. We see almost anything to be of greater importance when from the obscurity of thought, we bring it out into the daylight of speech."

"It will be just as I say, and saying it will not make it any more so," was Irene's almost sullen response to this. "I have my *own* ideas of things and my own individuality, and neither of these do I mean to abandon. If Hartley hasn't the good sense to let me have my own way in what concerns myself — then I will take my own way. As to the *troubles* that may come afterward, I do not give them any weight in the argument. I would die a martyr's death, rather than become the *passive creature* of another."

"My dear friend, why will you talk so?" Rose spoke in a tone of grief.

"Simply because I am in earnest. From the hour of our marriage, I have seen a disposition on the part of my husband to assume *control* — to make *his will* the general law of our actions. It has not exhibited itself in things of importance, but in *trifles*, showing that the spirit was there. I say this to you, Rose, because we have been like sisters, and I can tell you of my inmost thoughts. There is a *cloud* already in the sky, and it threatens an approaching *storm*."

"Oh, my friend, why are you so blind, so weak, so self-deceived? You are putting forth your hands, to drag down the *temple of happiness*. If it falls, it will crush you

beneath a mass of ruins; and not you only, but the one you have so lately pledged yourself before God, to love."

"And I do love him as deeply as ever man was loved. Oh that he knew my heart! He would not then shatter his image there. He would not trifle with a spirit formed for intense, yielding, passionate love — but rigid as steel and cold as ice when its *freedom* is touched. He should have known me better, before linking his fate with mine."

One of her *darker moods* had come upon Irene, and she was beating about in the blind obscurity of bitterness. As she began to give utterance to complaining thoughts — new thoughts formed themselves, and what was only vague feelings, grew into *ideas of wrong-doing* on the part of Hartley; and these, when once spoken, assumed a magnitude unimagined before. In vain did her friend strive with her. Argument, remonstrance, persuasion — only seemed to bring greater obscurity and to excite a more bitter feeling in her mind. And so, despairing of any good result, Rose withdrew, and left her with her own unhappy thoughts.

Not long after Miss Carman retired, Hartley came in. At the sound of his approaching footsteps, Irene had, with a strong effort, composed herself and swept back the deeper shadows from her face.

"Not ready yet?" he said, in a pleasant, half-chiding way. "The carriages will be at the door in ten minutes."

"I am *not* going to ride out," returned Irene, in a quiet, seemingly indifferent tone of voice. Hartley mistook her manner for sport, and answered pleasantly —

"Oh yes you are, my little lady."

"No, I am not." There was no misapprehension now.

"Not going to ride out?" Hartley's brows contracted.

"No, I am not going to ride out today!" Each word was distinctly spoken.

"I don't understand you, Irene."

"Are not my words plain enough?"

"Yes, they are too plain — so plain as to make them involve a mystery. What do you mean by this sudden change of purpose?"

"I don't wish to ride out," said Irene, with assumed calmness of manner; "and that being so, may I not have *my will* in the case?"

"No . . ."

A red spot burned on Irene's cheeks and her eyes flashed.

"No," repeated her husband; "not after you have given up that will to another."

"*To you!*" Irene started to her feet in instant passion. "And so I am to be *nobody* — and you the lord and master. My will is to be nothing — and yours the law of my life." Her lip curled in contemptuous anger.

"You misunderstand me," said Hartley, speaking as calmly as was possible in this sudden emergency. "I did not refer specially to myself, but to all of our party, to whom you had given up your will in a promise to ride out with them, and to whom, therefore, you were bound."

"An easy evasion," retorted the excited bride, who had lost her mental equipoise.

"Irene," the young man spoke sternly, "are those the right words for your husband? An easy evasion!"

"I have said them."

"And you *must* *unsay* them."

Both had passed under the *cloud* which *pride* and *anger* had raised.

"*Must!* I thought you knew me better, Hartley." Irene grew suddenly calm.

"If there is to be love between us, all barriers must be removed."

"Don't say *must* to me, sir! I will not endure the word."

Hartley turned from her and walked the floor with rapid steps, angry, grieved and in doubt as to what it were best for him to do. The *storm* had broken on him without a sign of warning, and he was wholly unprepared to meet it.

"Irene," he said, at length, pausing before her, "this conduct on your part is wholly inexplicable. I cannot understand its meaning. Will you explain yourself?"

"Certainly. I am always ready to give a reason for my conduct," she replied, with cold dignity.

"Say on, then." Hartley spoke with equal coldness of manner.

"I did not wish to ride out, and said so in the beginning. That ought to have been enough for you. But no — *my wishes* were nothing — *your will* must be law."

"And that is all! the totality of my offending!" said Hartley, in a tone of surprise.

"It isn't so much the *thing itself* that I object to, as the *spirit* in which it is done," said Irene.

"A spirit of *overbearing self-will!*" said Hartley.

"Yes, if you choose. That is what my soul revolts against. I gave you my heart and my hand — my love and my confidence — not my *freedom!* The last is a part of my *being* — and I will maintain it while I have life."

"Perverse girl! What insane spirit has got possession of your mind?" exclaimed Hartley, chafed beyond endurance.

"Say on," retorted Irene; "I am prepared for this. I have seen, from the hour of our marriage, that a time of *strife* would come; that *your will* would seek to make itself ruler — and that *I would not submit*. I did not expect the issue to come so soon. I trusted in your love to spare me, at least, until I could be bidden from general observation when I turned myself upon you and said, *Thus far you may go — but no farther*. But, come the struggle early or late — now or in twenty years — I am prepared."

There came at this moment a rap at their door. Hartley opened it.

"The carriage is waiting," said a servant.

"Say that we will be down in a few minutes," responded Hartley

The door closed.

"Come, Irene," said Hartley.

"You spoke very confidently to the servant, and said we would be down in a few minutes," responded Irene.

"There, there, Irene! Let this folly die; it has lived long enough. Come! Make yourself ready with all speed — our party is delayed by this prolonged absence."

"You think me trifling, and treat me as if I were a captious child," said Irene, with chilling calmness; "but I am neither!"

"Then you will not go?"

"I will *not* go!" She said the words slowly and deliberately, and as she spoke looked her husband steadily in the face. She was in earnest — and he felt that

further remonstrance would be in vain.

"You will repent of this," he replied, with enough of menace in his voice to convey to her mind a great deal more than was in his thoughts. And he turned from her and left the room. Going downstairs, he found the riding-party waiting for their appearance.

"Where is Irene?" was asked by one and another, on seeing him alone.

"She does not care to ride out this afternoon, and so I have excused her," he replied. Miss Carman looked at him narrowly, and saw that there was a *shadow of trouble* on his countenance, which he could not wholly conceal. She would have remained behind with Irene — but that would have disappointed the friend who was to be her companion in the drive.

As the party was in couples, and as Hartley had made up his mind to go without his young wife, he had to ride alone. The absence of Irene was felt as a drawback to the pleasure of all the company. Miss Carman, who understood the real cause of Irene's refusal to ride, was so much troubled in her mind that she sat almost silent during the two hours they were out. Hartley left the party after they had been out for an hour, and returned to the hotel. His excitement had cooled off, and he began to feel regret at the *unbending way* in which he had met his bride's unhappy mood.

"Her over-sensitive mind has taken up a wrong impression," he said, as he talked with himself; "and, instead of saying or doing anything to increase that impression, I should, by word and act of kindness, have done all in my power for its removal. Two wrongs never make a right. Passion met by passion results not in peace. I should have soothed and yielded, and so won her back to reason. As a man, I ought to possess a cooler and more rationally balanced mind. She is a being of feeling and impulse — loving, ardent, *proud*, sensitive and *strong-willed*. Knowing this, it was madness in me to chafe — instead of soothing her; to oppose her — when gentle concession would have torn from her eyes an illusive veil. Oh that I could learn wisdom in time! I was in no ignorance as to her peculiar character. I knew her faults and her weaknesses, as well as her nobler qualities; and it was for me to stimulate the one and bear with the others. Duty, love, honor, humanity, all pointed to this."

The longer Hartley's thoughts ran in this direction, the deeper grew his feeling of self-condemnation, and the more tenderly yearned his heart toward the young creature he had left alone with the enemies of their peace nestling in her bosom, and filling it with passion and pain. After separating himself from his party, he drove back toward the hotel at a speed that soon put his horses into a foam.

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