

After the Storm

The Bursting of the Storm

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1868

Chapter 5

Mr. Delancy was sitting in his library on the afternoon of the fourth day since the wedding-party left Ivy Cliff, when the entrance of someone caused him to turn toward the door.

"Irene!" he exclaimed, in a tone of anxiety and alarm, as he started to his feet; for his daughter stood before him. Her face was pale, her eyes fixed and sad, her dress in disorder.

"Irene, in heaven's name, what has happened?"

"The worst," she answered, in a low, hoarse voice, not moving from the spot where she first stood still.

"Speak plainly, my child. I cannot bear suspense."

"I have left my husband and returned to you!" was the firmly uttered reply.

"Oh, folly! Oh, madness! What evil counselor has prevailed with you, my unhappy child?" said Mr. Delancy, in a voice of anguish.

"I have counseled with no one but myself."

"Never a wise counselor — never a wise counselor! But why, why have you taken this desperate step?"

"In self-protection," replied Irene.

"Sit down, my child. There!" and he led her to a seat. "Now let me remove your bonnet and shawl. How wretched you look, my poor, misguided one! I could have laid you in the grave with less agony than I feel in seeing you thus!"

Her heart was touched at this, and tears fell over her face. In the *selfishness* of

her own sternly-borne trouble — she had forgotten the sorrow she was bringing to her father's heart.

"Poor child! poor child!" sobbed the old man, as he sat down beside Irene and drew her head against his bosom. And so both wept together for a time. After they had grown calm, Mr. Delancy said —

"Tell me, Irene, without disguise of any kind, the meaning of this step which you have so hastily taken. Let me have the beginning, progress and consummation of the sad misunderstanding."

While yet under the government of blind passion, before her husband returned from the drive which Irene had refused to take with him — she had, acting from a sudden suggestion that came to her mind, left her room and, taking the coaches, passed down to Albany, where she remained until morning at one of the hotels. In silence and loneliness she had, during the almost sleepless night that followed, ample time for reflection and repentance. And both came, with convictions of error and deep regret for the unwise, almost disgraceful step she had taken, involving not only suffering, but humiliating exposure of herself and husband. But it was felt to be too late now to look back.

In the morning, without partaking of food, Irene left in the New York boat, and passed down the river toward the home from which she had gone forth, only a few days before, a happy bride — returning with the *cup*, then full of the sweet wine of life — now brimming with the *bitterest potion* that had ever touched her lips.

And so she had come back to her father's house. In all the hours of mental anguish which had passed since her departure from Saratoga, there had been an accusing spirit at her ear. The *cause* of this unhappy rupture was so slight, the first *provocation* so insignificant — that she felt the difficulty of making out her case before her father. As to the world, *pride* counseled silence.

With but little concealment or extenuation of her own conduct, Irene told the story of her disagreement with Hartley.

"And that was all!" exclaimed Mr. Delancy, in amazement, when she ended her narrative.

"All, but enough!" she answered, with a resolute manner.

Mr. Delancy arose and walked the floor in silence for more than ten minutes, during which time Irene neither spoke nor moved.

"Oh, misery!" ejaculated the father, at length, lifting his hands above his head and then bringing them down with a gesture of despair.

Irene started up and moved to his side.

"Dear father!" She spoke tenderly, laying her hands upon him; but he pushed her away, saying —

"Wretched girl! you have laid upon my old head a burden of *disgrace* and *wretchedness* that you have no power to remove."

"Father! father!" She clung to him — but he pushed her away. His manner was like that of one suddenly bereft of reason. She clung still — but he resolutely tore himself from her, when she fell exhausted and fainting upon the floor.

Alarm now took the place of other emotions, and Mr. Delancy was endeavoring to lift the insensible body, when a quick, heavy tread in the portico caused him to look up, just as Hartley pushed open one of the French windows and entered the library. He had a wild, anxious, half-frightened look. Mr. Delancy let the body fall from his almost paralyzed arms and staggered to a chair, while Hartley sprung forward, catching up the fainting form of his young bride and bearing it to a sofa.

"How long has she been in this way?" asked the young man, in a tone of agitation.

"She fainted this moment," replied Mr. Delancy.

"How long has she been here?"

"Not half an hour," was answered; and as Mr. Delancy spoke, he reached for the bell and jerked it two or three times violently. The waiter, startled by the loud, prolonged sound, came hurriedly to the library.

"Send *Margaret* here, and then get a horse and ride over swiftly for Dr. Edmundson. Tell him to come immediately!"

The waiter stood for a moment, looking in a half-terrified way upon the white, deathly face of Irene, and then fled from the room. No grass grew beneath his horse's feet as he held him to his utmost speed for the distance of two miles, which lay between Ivy Cliff and the doctor's residence.

Margaret, startled by the hurried, half-incoherent summons of the waiter, came flying into the library. The moment her eyes rested upon Irene, who still lay insensible upon the sofa, she screamed out, in terror —

"*Oh, she's dead! she's dead!*" and stood still as if suddenly paralyzed; then, wringing her hands, she broke out in a wild, sobbing tone —

"My poor, poor child! Oh, she is dead, dead!"

"No, Margaret!" said Mr. Delancy, as calmly as he could speak, "she is not dead; it is only a fainting fit. Bring some water, quickly."

Water was brought and dashed into the face of Irene; but there came no sign of returning consciousness.

"Hadn't you better take her up to her room, Hartley?" suggested Margaret.

"Yes," he replied; and, lifting the insensible form of his bride in his arms, the unhappy man bore her to her chamber. Then, sitting down beside the bed upon which he had placed her, he kissed her pale cheeks and, laying his face to hers, sobbed and moaned, in the abandonment of his grief, like a distressed child weeping in despair for some lost treasure.

"Come," said Margaret, who was an old family servant, drawing Hartley from the bedside, "leave her alone with me for a little while."

And the husband and father retired from the room. When they returned, at the call of Margaret, they found Irene in bed, her white, unconscious face scarcely relieved against the snowy pillow on which her head was resting.

"She is alive," said Margaret, in a low and excited voice; "I can feel her heart beat."

"Thank God!" ejaculated Hartley, bending again over the motionless form and gazing anxiously down upon the face of his bride.

But there was no utterance of thankfulness in the heart of Mr. Delancy. For her to come back again to conscious life was, he felt — but a return to wretchedness. If the true prayer of his heart could have found voice, it would have been for death, and not for life.

In silence, fear, and suspense, they waited an hour before the doctor arrived. Little change in Irene took place during that time, except that her respiration became clearer and the pulsations of her heart distinct and regular. The application of warm stimulants was immediately ordered, and their good effects soon became apparent.

"All will come right in a little while," said Dr. Edmundson, encouragingly. "It seems to be only a fainting fit of unusual length."

Hartley drew Mr. Delancy aside.

"It will be best that I should be alone with her when she recovers," said he.

"You may be right in that," said Mr. Delancy, after a moment's reflection.

"I am sure that I am," was returned.

"You think she will recover soon?" said Mr. Delancy, approaching the doctor.

"Yes, at any moment. She is breathing deeper, and her heart beats with a fuller impulse."

"Let us, retire, then;" and he drew the doctor from the room. Pausing at the door, he called to Margaret in a half whisper. She went out also, Hartley alone remaining.

Taking his place by the bedside, he waited, in trembling anxiety, for the moment when her eyes should open and recognize him. At last there came a quivering of the eyelids and a motion about the sleeper's lips. Hartley bent over and took one of her hands in his.

"Irene!" He called her name in a voice of the tenderest affection. The sound seemed to penetrate to the region of consciousness, for her lips moved with a murmur of inarticulate words. He kissed her, and said again —

"Irene!"

There was a sudden lighting up of her face.

"Irene, my love! darling!" The voice of Hartley was burdened with tenderness.

"Oh, Hartley!" she exclaimed, opening her eyes and looking with a kind of glad bewilderment into his face. Then, half rising and drawing her arms around his neck, she hid her face on his bosom, murmuring —

"Thank God that it is only a dream!"

"Yes, thank God!" replied her husband, as he kissed her in a kind of wild fervor; "and may such dreams never come again!"

She lay very still for some moments. Thought and memory were beginning to act feebly. The response of her husband had in it something that set her to questioning. But there was one thing that made her feel happy — the sound of his loving voice was in her ears; and all the while she felt his hand moving, with a soft, caressing touch, over her cheek and temple.

"Dear Irene!" he murmured in her ears; and then her hand tightened on his.

And thus she remained until conscious life regained its full activity.

Then the *trial* came.

Suddenly lifting herself from the bosom of her husband, Irene gave a hurried glance around the well-known chamber, then turned and looked with a strange, fearful questioning glance into his face:

"Where am I? What does this mean?"

"It means," replied Hartley, "that the dream, thank God! is over, and that my dear wife is awake again."

He placed his arms again around her and drew her to his heart, almost smothering her, as he did so, with kisses.

She lay passive for a little while; then, disengaging herself, she said, faintly —

"I feel weak and bewildered; let me lie down."

She closed her eyes as Hartley placed her back on the pillow, a sad expression covering her still pallid face. Sitting down beside her, he took her hand and held it with a firm pressure. She did not attempt to withdraw it. He kissed her, and a warmer flush came over her face.

"Dear Irene!" His hand pressed tightly upon hers, and she returned the pressure.

"Shall I call your father? He is very anxious about you."

"Not yet." And she caught slightly her breath, as if feeling were growing too strong for her.

"Let it be as a dream, Hartley." Irene lifted herself up and looked calmly — but with a very sad expression on her countenance, into her husband's face.

"Between us two, Irene, even as a dream from which both have awakened," he replied.

She closed her eyes and sunk back upon the pillow.

Hartley then went to the door and spoke to Mr. Delancy. On a brief consultation it was thought best for Dr. Edmundson not to see her again. A knowledge of the fact that he had been called in, might give occasion for more disturbing thoughts than were already pressing upon her mind. And so, after giving some general directions as to the avoidance of all things likely to excite her mind unpleasantly, the doctor withdrew.

Mr. Delancy saw his daughter alone. The interview was long and earnest. On his part was the fullest disapproval of her conduct and the most solemnly spoken admonitions and warnings. She confessed her error, without any attempt at excuse or palliation, and promised a wiser conduct in the future.

"There is not one husband in five," said the father, "who would have forgiven an act like this, placing him, as it does, in such a false and humiliating position before the world. He loves you with too deep and true a love, my child — for girlish trifling like this. And let me warn you of the *danger* you incur of turning against you, the spirit of such a man. I have studied his character closely, and I see in it an element of firmness that, if it once sets itself, will be as inflexible as iron. If you repeat acts of this kind, the day must come when his forbearance will cease; and then, in turning from you, it will be never to turn back again. Harden him against you once — and it will be for all time."

Irene wept bitterly at this strong representation, and trembled at thought of the danger she had escaped.

To her husband, when she was alone with him again, she confessed her fault, and begged him to let the memory of it pass from his mind forever. On his part was the fullest denial of any purpose whatever, in the late misunderstanding, to bend her to his will. He assured her that if he had dreamed of any serious objection on her part to the ride, he would not have urged it for a moment. It involved no promised pleasure to him, apart from pleasure to her; and it was because he believed that she would enjoy the drive, that he had urged her to make one of the party.

All this was well, as far as it could go. But repentance and mutual forgiveness did not restore everything to the old condition — did not obliterate that *one sad page* in their history, and leave them free to make a new and better record. If the folly had been in private, the effort at forgiving and forgetting would have been attended with fewer annoying considerations. But it was committed in public, and under circumstances calculated to attract attention and occasion invidious remarks. And then, how were they to meet the different members of the wedding-party, which they had so suddenly thrown into consternation?

On the next day, the anxious members of this party made their appearance at Ivy Cliff, not having, up to this time, received any news of the fugitive bride. Mr. Delancy did not attempt to excuse to them the unjustifiable conduct of his daughter, beyond the admission that she must have been *temporarily deranged*. Something was said about resuming the bridal tour, but Mr. Delancy said, "No; the quiet of Ivy Cliff will yield more pleasure, than the excitement of travel."

And all felt this to be true.

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