

After the Storm

The Letter

By [Timothy Shay Arthur](#)

1868

Chapter 7

Yes, what did it mean? Christmas Eve, and Hartley still absent?

Twilight was falling when Irene came down from her room and joined her father in the library. Mr. Delancy looked into her face narrowly as she entered. The dim light of the closing day was not strong enough to give him its true expression; but he was not deceived as to its troubled aspect.

"And so Hartley will not be here today," he said, in a tone that expressed both disappointment and concern.

"No. I looked for him confidently. It is strange."

There was a constraint, a forced calmness in Irene's voice that did not escape her father's notice.

"I hope he is not sick," said Mr. Delancy.

"Oh no." Irene spoke with a sudden earnestness; then, with failing tones, added

—

"He should have been here today."

She sat down near the open grate, shading her face with a hand-screen, and remained silent and abstracted for some time.

"There is scarcely a possibility of his arrival tonight," said Mr. Delancy. He could not get his thoughts away from the fact of his son-in-law's absence.

"He will not be here tonight," replied Irene, a cold dead level in her voice, that Mr. Delancy well understood to be only a smoke-screen thrown up to conceal her deeply-disturbed feelings.

"Do you expect him tomorrow, my daughter?" asked Mr. Delancy, a few moments afterward, speaking as if from a sudden thought or a sudden purpose. There was a meaning in his tones that showed his mind to be in a state not prepared to brook evasion.

"I do," was the unhesitating answer; and she turned and looked calmly at her father, whose eyes rested with a fixed, inquiring gaze upon her countenance. But half her face was lit by a reflection from the glowing fireplace, while half lay in shadow. His reading, therefore was not clear.

If Irene had shown surprise at the question, her father would have felt better satisfied. He meant it as a probe; but if a tender spot was reached, she had the self-control not to give a sign of pain. At the tea-table Irene rallied her spirits and talked lightly to her father; it was only by an effort that he could respond with even apparent cheerfulness.

Complaining of a headache, Irene retired, soon after tea, to her room, and did not come down again during the evening.

The next day was Christmas. It arose as clear and mild as a day in October. When Irene came down to breakfast, her pale, almost haggard, face showed too plainly that she had passed a night of sleeplessness and suffering. She said, "*Merry Christmas,*" to her father, on meeting him — but there was no heart in the words. It was almost impossible to disguise the pain that almost stifled respiration. Neither of them did more than make a pretense at eating. As Mr. Delancy arose from the table, he said to Irene —

"I would like to see you in the library, my daughter."

She followed him passively, closing the door behind her as she entered.

"Sit down. There." And Mr. Delancy placed a chair for her, a little way from the grate.

Irene dropped into the chair like one who moved by another's volition.

"Now, daughter," said Mr. Delancy, taking a chair, and drawing it in front of the one in which she was seated, "I am going to ask a plain question, and I want a direct answer."

Irene rallied herself on the instant.

"Did you leave New York with the knowledge and consent of your husband?"

The blood mounted to her face and stained it a deep crimson:

"I left without his knowledge. I never ask his consent."

The old *proud* spirit was in her tones.

"I feared as much," replied Mr. Delancy, his voice falling. "Then you do not expect Hartley today?"

"I expected him yesterday. He may be here today. I am almost sure he will come."

"Does he know you are here?"

"Yes."

"Why did you leave without his knowledge?"

"To *punish* him."

"Irene!"

"I have answered without evasion. It was to *punish* him."

"I do not remember in the marriage vows you took upon yourselves anything relating to punishments," said Mr. Delancy. "There were explicit things said of *love* and *duty* — but I do not recall a sentence that referred to the right of one party to *punish* the other."

Mr. Delancy paused for a few moments — but there was no reply to this rather novel and unexpected view of the case.

"Did you by anything in the rite acquire authority to *punish* your husband when his conduct didn't just suit your fancy?"

Mr. Delancy pressed the question.

"It is idle, father," said Irene, with some sharpness of tone, "to make an issue like this. It does not touch the case. Away back of marriage contracts, lie *individual rights*, which are never surrendered. The right of self-protection is one of these; and if *retaliation* is needed as a guarantee of future peace, then the right to punish is included in the right of self-protection."

"A peace gained through *coercion* of any kind, is not worth having. It is but the *semblance* of peace — it is war in chains," replied Mr. Delancy. "The moment two married partners begin the work of *coercion* and *punishment* — that moment love begins to fail. If love gives not to their hearts a common beat, no other power is strong enough to do the work. Irene, I did hope that the painful

experiences already passed through would have made you wiser. It seems not, however. It seems that *self-will*, *pride* and a spirit of *retaliation* are to govern your actions — instead of patience and love. Well, my child, if you go on sowing this *noxious seed* in your garden now in the spring-time of life — then you must not murmur when autumn gives you a harvest of *thorns* and *thistles*. If you sow tares in your field — then you must not expect to find corn there when you put in your sickle to reap. You can take back your morning salutation. It is not a 'merry Christmas' to you or to me; and I think we are both done with merry Christmases."

"Father!"

The tone in which this word was uttered was almost a cry of pain.

"It is even so, my child — even so," replied Mr. Delancy, in a voice of irrepressible sadness. "You have left your husband a second time. It is not every man who would forgive the first offence; not one in twenty who would pardon the second. You are in great peril, Irene. This *storm* that you have conjured up, may drive you to hopeless shipwreck. You need not expect Hartley today. He will not come. I have studied his character well, and know that he will not pass this conduct over lightly."

Even while this was said, a servant, who had been over to the village, brought in a letter and handed it to Mr. Delancy, who, recognizing in the superscription the handwriting of his daughter's husband, broke the seal hurriedly. The letter was in these words:

My Dear Sir:

As your daughter has left me, no doubt with the purpose of finally abandoning the effort to live in that harmony so essential to happiness in married life, I shall be glad if you will choose some judicious friend to represent her in consultation with a friend whom I will select, with a view to the arrangement of a divorce, as favorable to her in its provisions as it can possibly be made. In view of the peculiarity of our temperaments, we made a *great error* in this experiment. My hope was that love would be counselor to us both; that the law of mutual forbearance would have rule. But we are both too impulsive, too self-willed, too undisciplined. I do not pretend to throw all the blame on Irene. We are as flint and steel. But she has taken the responsibility of separation, and I am left without alternative. May God lighten the burden of pain which her heart will have to bear in the ordeal through which she has elected to pass.

Your unhappy son-in-law,

Hartley Emerson

Mr. Delancy's hand shook so violently before he had finished reading, that the paper rattled in the air. On finishing the last sentence he passed it, without a word, to his daughter. It was some moments before the strong agitation produced by the sight of this letter, and its effect upon her father, could be subdued enough to enable her to read a line.

"What does it mean, father? I don't understand it," she said, in a hoarse, deep whisper, and with pale, quivering lips.

"It means," said Mr. Delancy, "that your husband has taken you at your word."

"At my word! What word?"

"You have left the home he provided for you, I believe?"

"Father!"

Her eyes stood out staringly.

"Let me read the letter for you." And he took it from her hand. After reading it aloud and slowly, he said —

"That is plain talk, Irene. I do not think anyone can misunderstand it. You have, in his view, left him finally, and he now asks me to name a judicious friend to meet his friend, and arrange a basis of divorce as favorable to you in its provisions as it can possibly be made."

"A divorce, father! Oh no, he cannot mean that!" And she pressed her hands strongly against her temples.

"Yes, my daughter, that is the simple meaning."

"Oh no, no, no! He never meant that."

"You left him?"

"But not in that way; not in earnest. It was only in fitful anger — half sport, half serious."

"Then, in Heaven's name, sit down and write him so, and that without the delay of an instant. He has put another meaning on your conduct. He believes that you have *abandoned* him."

"Abandoned him! Madness!" And Irene, who had risen from her chair, commenced moving about the room in a wild, irresolute kind of way, something like an actress under tragic excitement.

"This is meant to *punish* me!" she said, stopping suddenly, and speaking in a voice slightly touched with *indignation*. "I understand it all, and see it as a great outrage. Hartley knows as well I do, that I left as much in sport as in earnest. But this is carrying the joke too far. To write such a letter to you! Why didn't he write to me? Why didn't he ask me to appoint a friend to represent me in the arrangement proposed?"

"He understood himself and the case entirely," replied Mr. Delancy. "Believing that you had abandoned him — "

"He didn't believe any such thing!" exclaimed Irene, in strong excitement.

"You are deceiving yourself, my daughter. His letter is calm and deliberate. It was not written, as you can see by the date, until yesterday. He has taken time to let passion cool. Three days were permitted to elapse, that you might be heard from in case any change of purpose occurred. But you remained silent. You *abandoned* him."

"Oh, father, why will you talk in this way? I tell you that Hartley is only doing this to *punish* me; that he has no more thought of an actual *divorce* than he has of dying."

"Admit this to be so, which I only do in the argument," said Mr. Delancy, "and what better aspect does it present?"

"The better aspect of *sport* as compared with *earnest*," replied Irene.

"At which both will continue to play until *earnest* is reached — and a worse earnest than the present. Take the case as you will, and it is one of the saddest and least hopeful that I have seen."

Irene did not reply.

"You must elect some course of action, and that with the least possible delay," said Mr. Delancy. "This letter requires an immediate answer. Go to your room and, in communion with God and your own heart, come to some quick decision upon the subject."

Irene turned away without speaking and left her father alone in the library.

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