

**IRENE A TALE OF
SOUTHERN LIFE AND
HATHAWAY STRANGE.**

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Irene a Tale of Southern Life and Hathaway Strange. by Various

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VARIOUS

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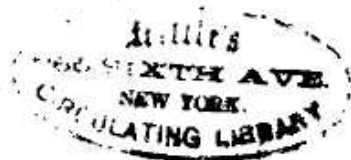


"He sprang forward, and leaning across the boat threw the lantern's rays into the hollow."

[Irene, page 37.]

I R E N E,

B



A TALE OF SOUTHERN LIFE;



HATHAWAY STRANGE.



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I R E N E,

A TALE OF SOUTHERN LIFE.

PART I.

CHAPTER I.

MY new neighbors had moved in, and my old ones were wondering who they could be.

The house the new neighbors had bought was situated directly opposite to mine. It was of brick, painted gray, with large rooms, high ceilings and wide, square windows. It was sufficiently homelike, notwithstanding its aristocratic style of architecture.

The new-comers had arrived after

dark: no one had had a glimpse of them, but, as is sure to be the case in all places except large cities, everybody was already on the *qui vive* to learn their history.

On the second morning after their arrival I prepared to call on them. I thought it could not be too soon, as they had sent me a letter of introduction from an old schoolmate of mine, in which she asked me to be kind to them for her sake, adding that they were

people of good standing and some means, but entire strangers to every one in our town. I was careful not to let the contents of this letter get abroad, but the fact of my having received it I could not conceal.

My ring was answered by a waiter-boy, who threw the hall door wide open, but did not offer to show me into the parlor. I handed him my card: he looked at it, but did not move.

"Take that to your mistress," I said, and he bolted, leaving me standing on the doorsill. "Well!" I thought, "a pretty beginning! But I think I shall take a seat, even if I have not been asked." It was well I did so, for certainly a half hour passed before I saw another soul. Of course I felt embarrassed, not knowing what to do. The hall was a scene of confusion, and so was every room of which I could get a glimpse through the half-open doors. Finally, a young woman came along, evidently on some errand, for she did not notice me at first, and so gave me a good opportunity of looking at her. I felt sure she could not be the lady of the house, for my friend had written that Mrs. Charlton was a middle-aged person with several children: indeed, I could hardly believe that this person was a lady. Being short and rather stout, her loose, ill-fitting dress gave her a very dowdyish appearance. She was not at all pretty: her complexion was dark and her hair and eyes were light.

On seeing me she expressed no surprise and made no excuse for her dress, but merely asked if "mother had not been down yet;" at the same time pushing open the parlor door.

"Come in," she continued, in a sweet voice that contrasted strangely with her appearance and manner. "Though this room doesn't look much better than the hall, you will be able to get a comfortable seat."

It did not, in fact, look much better, despite an elegant velvet carpet on the floor and rich furniture and pictures scattered in every direction. I seated myself in a large chair; then glanced

round at my companion, who was busying herself with books and sheet music.

"My goodness!" she exclaimed, "when shall we ever get straight? With all the servants that are in this house, I should think the parlor might have been fixed by this time. But there's Billy, that never will learn any sense. Half these things belong up stairs, I do declare!"

She paused and looked around. I felt I ought to say something, but at such times we are apt to be unlucky in our remarks, as I was on this occasion.

"The trouble arises," I observed, "from want of system. The best plan when one moves is to unpack all the things in one room or hall, and as they are unpacked and dusted, have them carried to their proper places. Then they get distributed and arranged much more quickly, and the whole house does not get dusty and soiled."

In reply to this speech she said, curtly, "I should like to see any one systematic in this house!"

If she had meant to add anything more, she was prevented by the entrance of another lady. "I rose, and, as my present companion took no notice of the new-comer, I stepped forward and introduced myself. Mrs. Charlton shook hands, saying, "Keep your seat, Mrs. Stone;" and when we had both sat down she turned to her daughter with the inquiry—

"What were you saying about system, Fannie?"

"I said no one liked it in this house."

"Fannie, I have always liked it, but I can't get you and Laura to practice it."

What was there in her voice that made it so fascinating? It was not so sweet as Fannie's, nor was it strong, like hers: it was low, melodious and plaintive—in the last respect alone suited to the style of her remarks. In appearance she was a ladylike person, small, with black hair and gray eyes. Her face wore an anxious expression. I sat looking at her, and wondered it did not occur to her to introduce Miss Fannie, and to offer some excuse for having kept me waiting. Neither

thought, it was evident, had entered her mind, and she continued her conversation with her daughter :

"Fannie, I have begged you to keep house: I can't do it. I have my little children to look after."

"Yes, and they are all you care for: they are the most spoilt children I ever saw."

Could it be her own mother the girl was speaking to? I sat in a state of bewilderment. Yet the words did not sound as they would have done from other voices. They were uttered in a tone of indifference, not of harshness or ill-nature.

"Well, I know one thing: this parlor is not going to be fixed until I do it myself." With that Miss Fannie continued her work of quietly assorting books, and spoke no more, while Mrs. Charlton turned to me and began a conversation about our mutual friend, recalling to my mind many persons and times of "long ago;" and very pleasantly the next hour passed. She was quite a well-informed woman, had lived in various places and had seen much of society, but she was very visionary.

When I rose to take leave, I made some excuse for calling so soon, stating my desire to be of use and offering the aid of one or two servants in putting the house to rights.

Here Fannie spoke up (having followed us into the hall):

"Plenty of servants here."

"How is it, then, Fannie, we can get nothing done? I have wanted my curtains put up ever since I came. When I ask Billy, he says he's too busy; John is always off somewhere: Laura made him get out the carriage and take her to ride yesterday at the very time I wanted him to go in search of some milk for baby."

"Well," I said, trying to get away, "I live just opposite—there; and it will give me pleasure to do anything I can for you. Do not hesitate to send to me."

I shook hands with both mother and daughter, thinking I was off. Just as I got to the end of the front gallery, however, Mrs. Charlton asked,

"How long have you lived here?"

"Since the first month after my marriage—not quite fifteen years."

"Just what I have always told Mr. Charlton. I wanted a home where I could stay all the time. I ought to have one: I have plenty of money."

What could I say? I was in haste to get home: I had many things to do that forenoon, and the sun, as I felt but too sensibly, was already blazing overhead.

"Is Mr. Charlton in D——?" I asked.

"Oh dear! no. He never thinks how much trouble it is to me to move. Just as we were ready to start he took it into his head to go somewhere, and wanted me to wait. I couldn't: everything was packed, so I came without him." She laughed; of which I took advantage, laughed too, bowed, and walked quickly away.

That afternoon she sent her three youngest children over to see me under the charge of two nurses. The baby came first—a very fine boy, about three months old; soon afterward a girl of about five years, with a boy two years younger. They were all extremely fair, but oh so spoilt and passionate! Baby was asleep, so his nurse took her seat on the gallery and kept him quiet: I was sitting in the hall, near the front door, with my little visitors by me.

The girl was very talkative; said her name was "Missy;" that she liked her new home very much; that the children, as she styled her brothers, were very bad; and that sister Laura was going to whip them if they went into her room. Here her nurse, who was standing behind her chair, interrupted her by saying, "And you too." The little lady curled up her nose, and continued: "I tell you they never bother sis Laura like they do sis Fan."

"Hush, Missy," said the nurse: "you talk too much."

She jumped down and pushed the nurse out of the room, but instead of returning to her seat, began running about the hall, going finally into the dining-room, where she found a plate of little tea-cakes: she helped herself

and brought one to her brother. When they had eaten these they went for more, and so continued until the last cake was finished.

Toward evening two young ladies came in, Louise and Emma Raiman, sisters of my next-door neighbor, and my own most intimate friends.

"Mrs. Stone," exclaimed Louise, "we come out of curiosity, as I may as well confess at once: we want to hear about our new neighbors. Of course, the whole town knows you called on them this morning."

"Yes," I answered, "I did, but I can't tell you much. I know there are two young ladies, so you will have an addition to society. I only saw one, however, and as she was in *deshabille*, I shall not decide upon her appearance."

"When would you advise us to call?—very soon?"

"Not for a few days: they are terribly upset as yet."

"Couldn't we assist them?" asked the impulsive Louise.

"No, no: you can't do them no good. So soon as they are at all settled I will go with you to call. Henry can go at the same time—perhaps some others." We sat together on the front doorsteps and whiled away the last hours of a fine autumn evening with harmless gossip, the conversation wandering to divers topics, but always returning to those new neighbors, who were at present the chief objects of interest and curiosity. We had heard, in an indirect way, before the receipt of my friend's letter, that they were qualified to mix with the very best society our town afforded, and though we prided ourselves upon being exclusive, yet an addition could not be otherwise than welcome. But was this a real acquisition? All that I had seen only tended to puzzle me. They were odd people, that was clear—very odd.

CHAPTER II.

SUNDAY passed: the Charltons were not at church, and my conscience

pricked me for not having offered them my pew.

On Tuesday evening I had arranged to call on them again, in company with Emma and Louise, my sober step-son, Henry Stone, and my mirth-loving cousin, Will Maury. I had seen Miss Fannie in the morning, and told her to expect company after tea. She and myself had become somewhat sociable, but of Miss Laura I had never had a glimpse, except from across the street.

When we entered the parlor she was seated at the piano looking over some songs, and never moved while my companions were presented to her sister, who then, after a very general introduction, turned away to talk to Henry Stone.

Laura seemed about nineteen, and was certainly a beautiful girl—tall and graceful, with golden hair, gray eyes and an exquisitely fair skin. Her features and form seemed moulded after the most regular pattern. Her dress was as perfect as her person—in the extreme of the fashion, but very elegant and becoming.

Fannie was much more negligently dressed than her sister, yet she too was not unattractive, despite her want of beauty. She talked vivaciously, sang charmingly and made herself generally entertaining. Laura, on the other hand, was stately and somewhat ceremonious. She had the singularly sweet voice which appeared to belong to the family, and which formed their fascination. She had also the same air of indifference on occasions when a more gracious manner would have been befitting. Mrs. Charlton did not make her appearance, and in answer to an inquiry whether she were well, Miss Laura only vouchsafed a careless "Oh yes."

An item of information which came out in regard to the family was that there were two other children, twin boys, about twelve years old.

We left early, and I invited the Misses Raiman into my house to partake of a cold collation.

"I declare, mother," said Henry Stone as we sat round the dining-table,

"your friends are odd people. I never so much as heard what that pretty girl's name was. Miss Fannie is clever, and I am anticipating fine times this winter. We have agreed to wake up old D——."

"Not a difficult task if *you* learn to frolic," said Will Maury: "that fact will be sufficient for a sensation."

Henry did not answer directly, but continued in a light tone—

"She was telling me how many dashes she had the week before leaving her old home."

"Dashes!" exclaimed all the little party: "pray what are they?"

"Don't you know?"

"No indeed!"

"Guess!"

"Can't—give it up."

"Horseback rides."

All laughed but myself. I didn't like either the slang or the tone of the remarks, and soon turned the conversation to another topic. What had Miss Charlton said to lead Henry Stone to speak lightly of a lady?

Time passed: the Charltons had got comfortably settled at last, had rented a pew just in front of mine, and had received and returned the visits of many of our most respectable families. Mr. Charlton, however, did not arrive. I asked Fannie one morning, when she came to return some books, when she expected her father.

With a most indifferent look she replied,

"Don't know—when he is ready, I suppose, but it takes him a long time to get ready."

Christmas came, and on the following evening I had a party, given expressly for the Misses Charlton. I made every exertion to have it stylish, and they certainly contributed to that object by not coming till after eleven o'clock.

I was not very well pleased at this, and Henry, I saw, was still more put out. But then he had had two or three disappointments that day, the first being the non-arrival of his brother from college, on whose gayety he had count-

ed for much of the amusement during the evening.

When the first dance was to begin Henry took out Fannie. He had been very attentive to her during the autumn, and this seemed a strong additional indication of a settled preference. I hinted as much to him after the dance.

"No, mother," he replied: "you are wrong this time. I hesitated myself, but gave her the precedence as the eldest."

"I am satisfied," I said, and went into the supper-room to see how the table looked. While there I heard some one walking in the side gallery. It was a cold night, and this gallery was on the north side of the house. I opened the glass door as the footsteps approached it, and beheld Laura Charlton and Will Maury.

"Come in, Will," I said. "I thought you had too much consideration to ask a young lady to walk in such a cold gallery."

He laughed, but she did not, and said,

"I am not afraid—I never take cold."

I went back to the parlors, where Emma Raiman told me they were trying to get up a dance of which no one knew the music but Laura Charlton.

"Where is she?" I asked.

"No one knows."

"Come here, Emma," I whispered: "go into the dining-room by yourself, and make Laura come in from the gallery: she has been absent too long."

She went, and returned with Laura, who very amiably played as long as she was asked to. Her execution was very brilliant. Will took a scat by me, and I scolded him for his thoughtlessness.

"Now, Cousin Katherine," he said, "don't blame me, when the lady was as willing as myself."

"Will, what is it to be—a flirtation or an engagement?"

"Heaven bless me if I know: she acknowledged that her heart was her own, but of her little hand I could ascertain nothing. I know one thing—she gets a bouquet every morning from