

The Stratagem of Irene

Capital Short Story in J. Morton Lewis' Best Vein.

BY J. MORTON LEWIS.

REALLY cannot say it was Irene's fault. In any other girl I might have blamed the action, but when a pair of blue eyes—aglow with life and insouciance—surveys you, blame takes wings, and you laugh with the culprit. Besides, Irene is Irene—that sums up the whole situation.

We have been friends for years; close friends, if the fact that she has refused me on three separate occasions makes the friendship any the more binding. It was about a week after the third refusal. We were seated in the garden, eating strawberries and cream, and discussing nothing with a solemnity that was worthy of a better cause.

Irene was seated on a low basket chair with a grace that was positively disconcerting. From beneath the folds of her skirt peeped a patent leather shoe and a few inches of openwork silk stocking. The sun shone on her hair, picking out the golden strands. Altogether the sight of her made me envious and bad-tempered.

"And so you are going to stay with the Kempshots for a few weeks," she said.

I nodded. It was a duty visit, and the prospect did not fill me with wild paroxysms of enthusiasm.

"Why don't you propose to Amy?" Irene surveyed me languidly.

"I might do worse," I retorted.

"Much worse," she acquiesced. "You might have been accepted by me. Think of it!"

"Truly I have much to be thankful for," I replied.

Irene laughed. She is truly provoking.

"I have seriously thought of proposing to Amy," I said.

"Dear girl. How happy she will be. And what a good wife she will make you—she could manage beautifully on \$500 a year. And I'm sure I couldn't."

"So am I," I retorted. "Your stockings alone must cost you a small fortune."

Irene flushed, and withdrew her foot. It was a very paltry point to score.

Half an hour later I rose to take my leave. "Then I shall expect to hear you are engaged to Amy when you come back," she said, smiling in farewell.

"You are sure she will accept me?"

"Could anyone refuse such an awfully nice, eligible boy such as you are?"

"I know one who did. I shall begin to think you are repenting in a minute."

"And if I did?"

I looked at Irene. I never know whether she is serious or not. She was surveying me demurely, but there was a mocking smile playing round the corners of her mouth.

"Then Amy can go to—"

"No, she can't, Dickie, dear. She's going to make you an ideal wife. Nice little tasty dishes when you come home tired from the city."

"Good-by, Irene," I said.

The mocking laugh followed me as I walked up the garden path.

The spirit of mischief must have entered me after I had been staying at the Kempshots for 24 hours. Perhaps it was a respite from the awful gayety of their house—gayety which would drive a tortoise mad with ennui. At any rate, I despatched a telegram to Irene on one of my walks. It ran: "Amy wants you to come to her wedding." After I had paid my sixpence, I thought no more about it until next morning.

At the breakfast table a couple of letters lay awaiting me. Mr. Kempshot had gone to town; only Mrs. Kempshot and Amy were at the table.

"Do read your letters if you would like to," said Mrs. Kempshot.

I thanked her and opened the envelope, which was addressed to me in Irene's somewhat sprawling handwriting.

It was a long letter. How she must have laughed as she wrote it.

"Dear Dick," it ran, "what did I say! I cannot tell you how happy I am. I am overjoyed at the good news—so overjoyed that I am writing to tell Miss Kempshot what an exemplary, nice young man she has got for a future son-in-law. The letter will go by

the same post as this, so if you are present when Mrs. Kempshot reads it, do not blush. I shall put it on awfully thick—I feel I owe it to you. I shall miss you awfully, but I daresay Amy will let me come sometimes and enjoy the marmalade she makes so beautifully. (Irene knows I abominate marmalade). Please let me know when the wedding will be. I must come."

I did not read any further, although there was another page and a half. My eyes wandered to Amy. She was facing me, the personification of prim and proper maidenhood; very proper and extremely prim.

Then they fell upon Mrs. Kempshot; she was stirring her tea and reading a letter. I recognized the writing. Beneath my breath I swore at Irene, silently and fluently. I went hot and cold all over. Amy is a delightful girl. She will make some man a most charming wife, but she is not for me; I know my limitations.

Mrs. Kempshot glanced up from the letter and smiled at me. "What will you have now, Dick?" she said. It was the first time she had called me Dick.

It was on my tongue to ask her for some prussic acid. "Nothing more," I murmured politely.

My brain was working furiously. I felt a fool, a cad, and I endeavored to find some way out of the awful predicament in which I was placed, thanks to Irene. Why should she want to write to Mrs. Kempshot? She might have waited until she had heard from me. My telegram was vague enough. And it was perfectly true. Only an hour before I had sent it Amy had told me she would like to have Irene for a bridesmaid if ever she was married. Why will women jump at conclusions? I thought it all over until my head ached. As far as I could see there was only one way out of the dilemma—one which must brand me as a cad for all time with the Kempshots.

Mrs. Kempshot put down the letter. The smile was still on her face. "I have heard from Irene this morning," she said.

It was a leading question. "Have you?" I replied feebly. "So have I."

Then followed a silence, one which was painful in the extreme. Mrs. Kempshot finished her cup of tea, drinking with a precision that was horrible. Then she pushed back her chair.

"Mrs. Kempshot," I said hurriedly, "I should like to speak to you."

"Certainly," she replied, and waited.

There was no help for it now but to go through with my apology as best I could. "Alone," I said.

"Will you come into the drawing-room?"

I followed her into the room and closed the door. When I looked around she was standing by the piano, her arms half folded. She is one of those women who always look stern and angular.

"Mrs. Kempshot," I said, "I owe you an apology."

She gave me the least possible help she could by remaining silent.

"I do not know what Irene could have meant writing to you about it."

"It was a very nice letter Irene sent me."

"I expect so; Irene's letters are always nice."

"Indeed!" Mrs. Kempshot's tones were frigid.

I felt sublimely miserable. "But still Irene had no right to jump to the conclusion that I was engaged to Amy."

"Indeed!" said Mrs. Kempshot again.

"No," I continued, gathering courage as I proceeded. "I only sent Irene a wire saying that Amy would like to see her at her wedding. I never suggested that Amy was going to marry me; nothing was further from my thoughts."

Mrs. Kempshot regarded me closely. She looked more angular than ever. "I don't quite follow you. Irene said nothing in her letter about you being engaged to Amy. Am I to understand that you and she have been joking together on the subject?"

"Well," I stammered. "Irene was teasing me about Amy the other day, and I sent her a telegram yesterday, saying that Amy would like to see her at her wedding."

"I should not have thought you would have been guilty of such ungentlemanly conduct," said Mrs. Kempshot. I wish Irene had been there to have heard her.

Of course there was only one thing for me to do. I did it. I think it took me exactly half an hour to pack my bag. I left the Kempshots, feeling the biggest fool I have ever felt in my life.

Straightway on reaching London I went to call upon Irene. I should find her in the garden, the servant told me.

I found her in the same chair in which she had sat chatting to me three days before. She looked up, and as she saw me raised her eyebrows. "You back in town already?"

"Irene," I said. "How dare you!"

"What?" she replied ingenuously.

"Take my beastly telegram seriously and write to Mrs. Kempshot about my engagement?"

"You didn't speak to Mrs. Kempshot?"

"What else could I do?" I replied bitterly. "I never had any intention of marrying Amy, and I thought—"

The rest of my explanation was drowned in laughter. "How perfectly lovely," said Irene, clapping her hands.

"I am glad you think so," I said. "I only wish you had seen Mrs. Kempshot instead of me. Irene, what made you do it?"

"Because," Irene studied the point of her shoe, "because I wasn't quite sure if you were serious. And I didn't think Amy was quite suitable for you. She isn't the girl I should like to see you marry."

"No," I replied. Then I looked at Irene. Her face had gone scarlet. "Irene," I said, "I believe—I honestly believe—"

"I'm not," she replied firmly.

She had placed her hands before her face. Going down on my knees, I gently drew them away. She averted her eyes, until I whispered a few words to her.

"Yes," she confessed, "that was why I sent you that letter."

I bent nearer and kissed her. "For the fourth time," I said, "will you—"

"Yes," she replied. "Yes, yes, yes."

The ground can be too loose to plant sweet clover in. Pack it hard after sowing. If you could tramp it in with stock it would be all the better. It does well even in alkali soils.

The Man For the job. "I understand you got into jail," said the warden, "on account of a glowing mining prospectus." "I was quite optimistic," admitted the gentlemanly prisoner. "Well, the governor wants a report on conditions in my jail. I want you to write it."

Don't pout if you don't win. Be kind to the winner and then go home and break your troubles gently to the gate post.

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