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# THE LUCKY RING

By MRS. L. T. MEADE.

HERE was a great deal of fuss at the Hall, for Susie, the only daughter of the house, was to be married on the following day.

Four hundred guests were invited to be present at the ceremony. They were to see the bride and bridegroom made one by the words of the Church service, and were afterwards to enjoy Squire Field's hospitality in the old Hall.

Susie had two or three brothers, but no sisters. She was the youngest of the family, not more than nineteen years of age. From her earliest days, she had been much petted and fussed over, and with reason, for she was sweet in nature and beautiful in face. More than one man had wanted to make her his wife, but Susie's love had been given for over a year to Edward Armitage, the eldest son of a neighbouring squire, and in every way a suitable match for her.

The time of year was July, and the weather was perfect. Susie was standing on the lawn, idly watching the preparations for the erection of a huge marquee, where the many guests were to partake of light refreshments on the morrow. She heard steps coming up behind her, and turned to meet the grave gaze of her cousin, whom she had not seen for over a year.

His name was Philip Kingdon. He was a young barrister, who was rising rapidly in his profession. He and Susie had been always fond of each other. She was accustomed to his visits at Christmas and Midsummer, and now she gave a little cry of rejoicing, and held out both her hands to him.

"O, Philip, this is good!" she said. "What train did you come by? I didn't expect you until this evening."

"I managed to catch the twelve o'clock train from St. Pancras," was the answer; "and here I am."

Philip held the girl's small hands perhaps one moment longer than was necessary, and perhaps for one brief moment, too, he looked into her eyes with an expression she did not half understand, but which gave her a sensation both of pain and regret. But whatever his emotions, Philip Kingdon quickly recovered himself.

"Tell me all about yourself, Susie. Remember, I have not seen you for quite a year. I know Armitage by repute, but have never met him."

"You will see him at dinner to-night," said Susie.

"And so," continued Philip, beginning to walk slowly by the girl's side, "by this time to-morrow you and Edward Armitage will be husband and wife. How do you like the idea?"

"How do I like it?" she answered, raising her sweet flower-like face to his; "why, of course, Philip, I can scarcely realise my own happiness. There never was anybody like Ted. Phil, I love him with all my heart and soul."

"Then that is as it should be, dear little girl," said her cousin.

He was silent after this speech for a couple of minutes. Then he put his hand into his pocket.

"I have brought you," he said, "a wedding present, and I want to give it to you my own self. Here."

He touched a spring in a little case. The lid flew open and revealed a ring with a dull stone in the middle, and with some curious writing engraved all round it.

"How queer!" said Susie.

She looked at the writing in astonishment, but without admiration.

"May I put it on your finger myself?"

"Yes, if you like; but will it fit me?"

"It is very small; it is meant for your little finger. I bought it a long time ago—over a year ago." Philip suppressed a sigh. "I was travelling at the time, and was just leaving Damascus—"

"Damascus!" interrupted Susie. "Did that ring come from there?"

"It came from a place even farther off. It came from Mecca. It is supposed to be a peculiarly blessed ring. I got it from an Arab, who told me that the wearer of the ring could always, by its magic, ensure the undying love of the one she most cared for. I knew you must have all sorts of wedding gifts, but this ring is different from the others. I am not superstitious, but I should rather like to see it on your finger."

"You regard it as a sort of mascot," said the girl. "How queer!"

"You will wear it, Susie, won't you?" said the young man.

"Oh, yes!" she replied; and she held out her small finger for Philip to place the ring on it.

Neither Philip nor Susan knew that at that moment they were observed—that a tall, fair, clean-shaven man, very well set up and with an eager face, was watching them from a little copse of trees close by.

This man was no less a person than Edward Armitage. What he felt, what his conjectures were, was best known to himself. Instead of coming on to the house to spend a happy hour with Susie, he turned on his heel, muttered an angry curse under his breath and, getting into his motor car which was waiting for him at gate, went back to his father's house, Armitage Manor, three miles away.

At dinner, that evening, a large party were assembled, amongst whom were present the bridegroom and his father and mother. Susie, in the greatest possible delight at having not only Ted—present at her dinner party, but also her favourite cousin, Philip, was in the highest spirits. Everyone noticed the expression of bliss on her face. But Edward Armitage, consumed by jealousy, read it wrong.

"Never had she been in such spirits before in my company," he said to himself. "Nothing will induce me to marry a girl who cares for another man better than for me. I will have it out with her after dinner. I don't mind if it is the eve of our wedding. It is far better that I should know what I am nearly certain of now than that I should wait until afterwards."

Outwardly, Armitage was in good spirits, and Philip, who was most anxious to study Susan's future husband, looked at him with approval.

"He will make her quite a good husband," he said to himself. "It would be more than I could stand if he were not worthy of her. But I believe he is. Only, what is the matter with him? Why does he frown so when he looks at me?"

When the men came along into the drawing-room after dinner, Susie ran up to her lover.

"Please come out with me, Ted," she said. "I want to show you something."

He gave her a peculiar look.

"Can she be so blind as not to know that that other fellow worships her?" was his thought. "Can she be so blind? But no; like all women, she is hypocritical. Philip Kingdon is the man she loves. I happen to be better off, therefore she has chosen me; but she will soon discover that I am not one to be trifled with."

Poor Susie, little guessing her lover's real thoughts, walked with him into the very copse of young trees

where he had witnessed Philip Kingdon's actions on the afternoons of that day.

"Oh, I am so happy!" said Susie. "Six weeks ago, I thought the day would never come. Now it is close—it is so close that my very happiness almost frightens me."

"You looked happy to-night," said Armitage. "You are pleased at the arrival of your cousin, Kingdon."

"Of course I am. Dear old Phil! I have known him nearly all my life; and he—O Ted!—he has given me such a funny present. Look—you must look." She held up her finger on which the queer looking ring was placed. "This is a lucky ring—a sort of talisman; and he bought it in Damascus for me."

"I have no doubt he did—confound him!"

"Ted!"

"Take that ring off, Susan."

"Ted," said the girl, startled at his tone and all her high spirit asserting itself, "you have no right to speak to me like that. Why should I take Philip's ring from my finger?"

"Well," said Armitage, his eyes blazing, "you can choose between him and me. It isn't too late. I brook no man's interference. You shall wear no ring that I have not given you. Take the ring off, if you wish the ceremony to be gone through."

"Edward," said the girl in amazement, "what—what are you thinking of?"

"I know myself what I am thinking of," said the angry man. "I came here this afternoon, hoping to have a quiet hour with you, and I saw you, from this very spot, hob-nobbing with that fellow, your hand in his, while he slipped the ring on your finger. Do you suppose I am likely to brook that sort of thing?"

"I don't understand. I think you are very queer," said Susan.

"It is you who are queer. How dare you accept a ring from another man on the very eve of your marriage with me?"

"Ted, I don't understand you," said the poor girl. "Philip is such an old friend, and—he bought this ring for me a long time ago."

"I daresay," said Armitage. "I have no doubt he did, and he meant to give you another as well, only that I—as he supposed—forestalled him. But I won't forestall him. I won't be second with any other man in my wife's affections."

"Ted," said Susie, "do you really mean what you are saying—do you really, really mistrust me?"

"I cannot mistrust my own eyesight, Susan."

"O Ted!" said the poor girl, bursting into tears. "Then I am indeed most miserable."

"It is better to be miserable now than afterwards," was Armitage's retort. "You cannot say to my face that you don't care for that fellow. I won't be second; and I won't allow anybody else to give you a ring. Here; take that off your finger if you still care for me."

But Susan Field was proud. She was not the daughter of a distinguished line of ancestors for nothing. Her soft brown eyes blazed with sudden anger.

"You are unreasonable," she said. "If you refuse to part with Philip's ring, if you want me, you must take me and the ring too. It is a lucky ring, and the dear old fellow gave it to me in all sincerity, and with the kindest and best thoughts for me and my father. You don't know Philip; but I do. He is the best of men."

"Then you can keep your best of men," said the angry lover; "but understand clearly, Susan, there will be no wedding to-morrow unless you resign the ring."

"Then there needn't be," she answered. She was white as a sheet with passion

and distress. Armitage gave her a quick look, then turned abruptly on his heel and left her. Half an hour later, a pale and terrified girl entered the house by a side door. She went straight up to her own room. When she found herself inside the room, she locked the door. Then she drew a sigh of relief. Something very awful had happened. She felt incapable of realising it, and yet it pursued her, setting its cruel claws into her heart, and causing her head to feel weak and dizzy.

Armitage was angry. He had shown the most unreasonable jealousy. No; she would certainly not give up Philip's ring—Philip, who had been her friend always, who had helped her with her lessons long ago, who had taught her to ride, who had taken her and her brother for long expeditions all over the country. He was her friend when they went to London, preparing some special pleasure for them day after day. He had come to be present at her wedding, and he had given her a little innocent ring—a ring with a charm attached. Certainly she would not part with it. If Ted understood her so little as really to wish her to give Philip back his ring, then she was better without him—oh, of course she was better without him. They had quarrelled. Their engagement was at an end. How strange to have an engagement broken off on the night before the wedding. What would the guests say? What would her father and mother say? What would Philip Kingdon say?

Susie passed her hand wearily before her eyes. There came a tap at the door, and her mother's voice was heard.

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