

# THE SILVER RING.

By THOMAS COBB.

\*\*\*\*\*

"I am certain," said Sophia, "that there is something on your mind."

"Now, how did you find that out?"

"Of course, I can always tell," she said, with a charming air of confidence.

"But how?" I persisted.

"Whilst you are talking to me," she answered, "you are thinking of somebody else."

"It is usually the other way about," I assured her.

"What do you mean?" asked Sophia. "Whilst I am talking to anyone else I am thinking of you."

"Tell me what it is," she exclaimed. "Well," I said, "you remember that ring—"

"Which ring?" asked Sophia, with a blush.

"The ring I gave to you—"

"Did you ever give me a ring?" she inquired, with an expression which suggested that she was making a valiant effort to recollect.

"It was the Christmas before last—"

"Then you surely don't expect me to remember anything about it," said Sophia.

"Anyhow, I was staying with you at Stenbridge, and your Aunt Hilda wanted a ring to put in the Christmas pudding."

"Such an absurd custom!" cried Sophia.

"Nobody seemed eager to take off her wedding ring," I continued.

"Had you come provided with one?" she asked.

"Of course not. But I wore a curious kind of silver ring—a plain band, with a dragon engraved on it. I was foolish enough to regard it as a sort of talisman."

"You lent it then?" asked Sophia.

"It subsequently fell to your share," I reminded her.

"Then, according to the superstition," she said, "I ought to have been married within the year."

"That, no doubt, would have been the ideal arrangement," I admitted, and Sophia stared pensively out of the window.

"I wonder," she answered, "what my husband would have been like?"

"I wish you would look at me—"

"O—oh!" exclaimed Sophia.

"While I am talking to you," I continued. "I don't know whether you recollect that you wanted me to take back the ring."

"My memory is dreadful," she said.

"But I wouldn't have it back—"

"Why not?" asked Sophia.

"You may be certain I had a reason."

"A very ridiculous one, no doubt," she answered.

"Anyhow, I urged you to keep it, and you said you would—"

"But," exclaimed Sophia, with her face as red as a peony, "I told you I should never wear it."

"Then memory is beginning to return," I suggested.

"Very faintly," she answered, and I fancied that Sophia had lost some of her customary calmness.

"Of course," I continued, "it was not the sort of ring you could wear; besides, it was far too big—you let me try it on your finger, you know."

"At the dinner table?" she asked, with an ingenuous expression. "Oh, dear, no. It was on the stairs."

"After all," said Sophia, "a ring you can't wear isn't of much use!"

"Still," I cried, "I didn't think you would give it away."

"I didn't give it away," she exclaimed. "Well, it's an odd thing," I said, when she interrupted me hastily.

"My allowing you to leave it with me?"

"Not at all. But I happened to be at Talbot's rooms the other evening—you know Talbot?"

"I have met him, of course," said Sophia.

"Rather often," I suggested.

"Freddie is such a nice boy," she murmured.

"I saw the ring on his mantelshelf," I said, and Sophia was apparently astonished.

"You—you saw my ring on Freddy Talbot's mantelshelf?" she cried, sinking into the nearest chair.

"Yes"

"You were not foolish enough to tell him—"

"I merely inquired how he got it."

"What did he say?" she asked eagerly.

"He insisted that he hadn't the slightest notion—he had simply seen it lying there!"

"If I had given it to him," answered Sophia, "he would scarcely have forgotten."

"Yet," I suggested, "you had forgotten that I gave it to you."

"That," she retorted, "was more than eighteen months ago."

"If you didn't give it to him—"

"I didn't," answered Sophia.

"Then how did it come into his room?"

"Perhaps it wasn't the same ring," Sophia remarked.

"I am certain," I insisted.

"But—how can you tell?" she demanded.

"I had scratched my initials inside," I said, "and I noticed that you had scratched yours."

"I always like to mark my things," answered Sophia, staring at the window again.

"So that if you didn't give—"

"I have told you I did nothing of the kind!"

"Or you may have lent it—"

"I never prevaricate," said Sophia, in her most dignified manner.

"Well," I cried, "I can't understand how Talbot got possession of the thing."

"It does appear mysterious," she admitted, "but it is not of the remotest consequence."

"Still, I should like to clear the matter up."

"You never will," said Sophia.

"Where used you to keep the ring?" I asked. I had never seen her with such a constant colour.

"Oh, I—I daresay it was in my jewel case," she answered casually.

"When did you see it last?"

"I decline to be cross-examined," she exclaimed, a little impatiently.

"But," I persisted, "did you know that Talbot had the ring?"

"Of course not."

"It is true it was of very little value," I suggested.

"Then," she cried, "why do you make such a fuss about it?"

"You see, I hoped you might keep it until—"

"Until when?" asked Sophia.

"Oh, well, just for another year."

"Is anything likely to happen within the next year?" she demanded.

"I hope so," I answered. "You see I am beginning to make my way a little."

"I always knew you would make your way," said Sophia, with pleasant promptness.

"Still," I suggested, "it's dangerous to count one's chicks—"

"I always count mine," she returned. "Doesn't it lead to occasional disappointment?" I asked.

"Not exactly disappointment."

"What, then?"

"Oh, well," said Sophia, "a watched pot seems so long in boiling, y. u. know."

"Still," I exclaimed, "I should like to know how the ring got out of your jewel case!"

"Suppose we talk of something else," she said. "Perhaps," she suggested, "it wasn't in there!"

"Then you don't really know where it was?" I asked.

"No," she murmured. "At least—"

"And you didn't care!" I cried, as I rose.

"Oh, dear!" said Sophia, "how persistent you are to-day."

"I can't help thinking," I answered.

"that you know all about it."

"You will be judicious to go before you make me angry," she cried.

"Angry!"

"How many times haven't I told you I had no suspicion that Freddy had the ring?"

"Still," I insisted, "I believe you could clear up the mystery."

"Oh, that is very likely," said Sophia.

"Well," I urged, "you may as well be merciful and spare me a sleepless night."

"No," was the answer, "I don't intend to tell you."

"Why not?"

"You would be sure to misunderstand—"

"To misunderstand!"

"You know you always do misunderstand that kind of thing," said Sophia.

"A few minutes ago," I answered, "you said you had no idea—"



"Oh, dear no! It was on the stairs."