

LOVE OF A LADY

ALICE MAUD MEADOWS
Author of "One Life at a Time," "The Cup of Life," "Days of Doubt," etc.

"Heaven bless you," he said, softly. "Last night, when I left you, I walked home, let myself in as usual, and went straight to my bedroom without going into my sitting-room. I was soon asleep, but I awoke in fear and trembling from a dream, and then I could not sleep again."

He paused a moment, whilst, unconsciously, his hand round the girl tightened. "I know," she said, gently. "I have had dreams like that, Philip. I went to my sitting-room, and there, stretched on the hearthrug, I found a woman!"

She started a little, but her fingers still pressed him, not by the slightest movement or change of expression did she show distrust.

"He bent and kissed her," he said. "She was quite dead, Leslie," he said. "She had been stabbed in the back—murdered!"

"She uttered a little cry, she crept closer to him, and her eyes involuntarily sought the hearthrug."

"On Philip, how awful, how terrible! Did you know her? It was Caroline!"

"Caroline! The woman you—"

"Loved as a boy, the woman whom I have not seen for three years, yes," she said. "There is so little to tell," he answered. "How she found her way to my rooms, with whom she came, I don't know. It's all a mystery. One thing only seems certain. I shall be suspected of this crime. I can surely clear myself; still, I shall be suspected. Under the circumstances, Leslie, I don't think I have a right to put a ring on your finger."

"Philip!"

"Any way, I think I must speak to Mrs. Strangeways first. The engagement is chronicled in the papers, still, it could be contradicted."

She drew from him, her eyes flashing. "Is that the sort of woman you think I am?" she said. "For shame, Philip! Am I only to love you when things go smoothly and desert you when trouble arises?"

"The woman who loves you to the first, by her conduct, to show a doubt of you? Put the ring on my finger this minute."

But he hesitated. Had he the right to?

"This minute," she repeated. "If you don't, I'll never speak to you again. Oh, Philip! can't you see how awfully you're hurting me?"

"Heaven knows, I don't want to hurt you," he said, but—

"Philip, my ring before you say another word."

She held out her hand, and, after a moment, he slipped it on her finger. "My own dearest," he said. "How can I ever thank you for your trust?"

"I don't want you to thank me. Is it in the papers yet, Philip?"

"Yes."

"Then perhaps we had better tell Mrs. Strangeways. It would be a shock if she read it without any warning. Poor woman! Have you any idea who did it?"

"None. So far as I know no one in the house knew her, and even had they how could they have got into my rooms, and why?"

She knitted her pretty eyebrows. "May it not have been a plot to throw suspicion upon you? Someone may have known that you had known her once. It seems to me a murderer's best chance of escape is to throw suspicion upon someone else. Someone may have heard you were going out, someone may have known they were safe from interruption in your rooms."

"But who?" she asked.

"Ah, that we must find out." She touched the bell as she spoke. A servant answered it.

"Have you let Mrs. Strangeways know Mr. Gilechrist is here?" she asked.

"The ghost of a smile crossed the man's face. He had been young and a lover himself once."

"No, miss."

"Will you do so now, please?"

"The man went from the room, and very soon Mrs. Strangeways rustled into it."

"She smiled as she held out her hand. 'I'm very angry with you, really,' she said, 'because I consider Leslie should have made a much better match. I reckoned on your capturing a still, but, of course, I've no authority. Still, I warn you, Philip, everyone will say that she is throwing herself away.'"

"Not everyone," Leslie put in. "Not the person most concerned."

"Mrs. Strangeways looked at her brightly."

"The person least able to judge properly," she said. "However, you think you are going to be happy, and that's generally as far as it goes with any of us. Oh, yes, it is, you foolish young people, so I suppose I must congratulate you."

"She leaned forward and kissed Leslie, then she turned, and a little to his surprise she kissed Philip."

"Though I wonder who had the impudence to propose," she said. "I'm afraid I proposed, or something very like it," Leslie said. "But Philip doesn't mind, and now we're something to tell you. We're in deep trouble already."

"Strangeways lifted her arched eyebrows."

"You may well say already," she answered. "I see the ring; it fits, so it's not that. It's a very handsome one."

"Looking kindly at Philip, then her expression changed. 'Bless the boy, what is he as white as a ghost?'"

"And Philip told her briefly while she listened in absolute silence. When he had finished her face had grown a little red."

"'You mean to keep Leslie to her engagement,' she said. 'With this disagreeable thing hanging over you. Impossible, because I refuse to let him break it,' said Leslie. 'Is he to have two troubles because he has one?'"

"'As a man of honor—' Mrs. Strangeways began."

"'He will not break his word to me,' Leslie continued. 'It's no good you talking of the whole world talking. If Philip tore the ring off my finger—which he won't, of course—I should proclaiming it to the world, and surely it's our place to fight for him, not against him.'"

"Mrs. Strangeways's face was almost colorless. All the brightness had gone out of it."

"'Well, what of that? Innocent men have been arrested before now.'"

"'I shall send a paragraph to the papers contradicting the engagement.'"

"'If you do I shall send a paragraph proclaiming it to the world, and surely it's our place to fight for him, not against him.'"

"Mrs. Strangeways turned to Philip. 'Surely you see,' she said, 'what you are doing to him? If he'll get a special license and take me to church at once, make me his wife before they get hold of him and shut him up away from me, I'll thank him with all my grateful heart.'"

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"'And I have declined to be freed. I love Philip and Philip loves me. I want to marry him before now, and he wants to marry me. I'm not afraid of this cloud that for a moment—only for a moment—overshadows our happiness; neither is he. If he'll get a special license and take me to church at once, make me his wife before they get hold of him and shut him up away from me, I'll thank him with all my grateful heart.'"

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