

Mrs. Cudmuffle's Ring
by Judge Clark

“You’re very thoughtless—very thoughtless, indeed!” muttered Mr. Cudmuffle, with a disturbed glance at the dimpled hand whose taper fingers were busy finding the place in the family prayer-book. “Upon my word, it’s too bad!”

The hand was Mr. Cudmuffle’s wife’s; but fastidious in the matter of wifely charms as husbands are prone to become in time, it would have puzzled any one—not in the secret—to tell what there was in the fair object of Mr. Cudmuffle’s glance to evoke criticism—especially just when the Rev. Mr. Callowdown was clearing his throat to begin the evening service, and Mr. Cudmuffle’s thoughts should have been fixed on other things.

“Where’s your ring?” whispered Mr. Cudmuffle.

“I—I must have forgotten it on my dressing-case,” stammered Mrs. Cudmuffle, confused and blushing.

Had all the possible sins of omission been comprised in that one, Mr. Cudmuffle would hardly have felt more shocked and indignant. The ring in question—a wedding gift to his spouse—had cost, we are afraid to guess how much, —though it is safe to say the amount had since been saved, several times over, by the system of pinching economy rigidly enforced by Mr. Cudmuffle in the matter of his wife’s expenditures. That she should wear the costly ornament on all public occasions—especially at church—was a point he insisted on, not only in dutiful recognition of his rare munificence, but as a becoming tribute to his state and dignity. When Mrs. Cudmuffle’s hand supported its side of the Cudmuffle psalter, and after the rich diamond cluster flashed its many-colored rays into the eyes of envious worshipers, Mr. Cudmuffle’s heart glowed with satisfaction.

“How *could* you be so careless?” continued Mr. Cudmuffle’s chiding whisper. “I shouldn’t wonder if it were stolen. There’s that new governess, with her fine-lady airs—”

Here Mr. Callowdown’s solemn intonation of the opening of the service, cut Mr. Cudmuffle short.

When they reached home Mr. Cudmuffle accompanied his wife to her dressing-room, and insisted on an immediate search for the ring. It was not found where Mrs. Cudmuffle thought she had left it, and every possible and impossible hiding-place was ransacked in vain.

It was with some difficulty that Mrs. Cudmuffle dissuaded her excited mate, Sunday night as it was, from piping all hands to undergo search, beginning with Miss Ayres, the governess.

“Remember, my dear,” Mrs. Cudmuffle expostulated, “you have not sufficient proof; and to

accuse a lady, like Miss Ayres, without good ground to go upon, might get you into trouble.”

“You take it very coolly!” growled Mr. Cudmuffle.

Nevertheless he remembered a swinging verdict recovered against him by a clerk whose arrest he had once caused on insufficient evidence. This time he resolved to be more circumspect, and to consult his pillow on the case.

Mr. Cudmuffle, after a hasty breakfast next morning, sallied forth bright and early; and some hours later his wife went on a visit, leaving the house to Miss Ayres, the little Cudmuffles, and the servants.

Near midday Mr. Cudmuffle returned with two companions—one a short, thickset, bluff-mannered man, coarse and harsh of feature; the other, a meagre-faced, hook-nosed individual, one glance of whose cold, kindless eye would have extinguished the last hope of a crum in the heart of a starving dog.

Entering with his latch-key, Mr. Cudmuffle conducted the unprepossessing pair to the sitting-room, where leaving them, he ascended the stairs and tapped at a door which was opened by a young lady of rare beauty and evident refinement.

“A couple of visitors are waiting to see you in the sitting-room, Miss Ayres,” said Mr. Cudmuffle, who at once passed on to his own apartment.

“That’s her,” whispered he of the meagre face, as Grace Ayres entered the room where the two strangers were, at whose singular appearance she drew back half surprised and half frightened.

“Come, my fine leddy, none o’ that ’ere!” exclaimed the heaviest man, laying his hand, not over lightly, on Grace’s shoulder. “You’re my pris’ner, you see, an’ it’s no use tryin’ to cut away.”

Then turning up his lapel, he displayed an official badge.

“Your—your prisoner!” faltered the terror-stricken girl, whose tottering limbs would have quite given way but for the rough support she received from her captor.

“Come along, Miss!” urged the latter. And snatching up some article of feminine head-gear which chanced to be at hand, he thrust it on his prisoner’s head and hurried her into the street. Then calling on a cab, he lifted her in and took a place by her side; and before Grace could collect her scattered senses, she was driven rapidly away.

Not many minutes later Mr. Cudmuffle received a call from a young gentleman, whose first inquiry was if Miss Grace Ayres was an inmate of the house.

“A person of that name *has* been stopping here,” Mr. Cudmuffle began; “but if you’ve any interest in her—”

“I *have* an interest—the very deepest interest in her,” the stranger interrupted.

“I’m sorry to say, then,” replied Mr. Cudmuffle, “she doesn’t deserve it.”

“Sir!”

“She’s just been carried off a prisoner.”

For an instant the young man’s face turned deathly pale; but almost at the same moment the handsome features were covered with a flush of indignation, whilst from the keen, bright eyes a dangerous fire flashed.

“You must explain your words, and that quickly,” he said in a voice tremulous with suppressed passion.

“That is easily done,” returned Mr. Cudmuffle. “My wife had a valuable ring stolen. It has just been discovered at a pawnbroker’s shop, and Miss Ayres has been identified as the person who pledged it. She is now in custody, charged with the theft, and in a fair way to meet speedy justice.”

It was a lucky thing for Silas Cudmuffle that his wife at that moment appeared upon the scene, and got between him and the stranger.

“Who charges Grace Ayres with the theft?” she exclaimed, turning on her husband. “True, she pawned the ring, but I sent her to do it. I needed an amount of money and had no other way to get it, but was too great a coward, when you missed the ring, to acknowledge the truth.”

Without a moment’s time wasted, all three hastened to the police station, where a word set matters right.

On Leicester Worth’s return from three years of travel, he learned that Grace Ayres had been driven from her mother’s house by a stepfather’s cruelty, to gain her bread as best she might. Leicester, who had long loved Grace, determined to search till he found her, and we have just seen how, at last, he succeeded.

Mr. Cudmuffle redeemed the pledged ring; but except when it is in actual use, he always keeps it under private lock and key.

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