

# The Storyteller

## MRS. COWSLIP'S REPENTANCE

In her narrow quarters off the end of the assembly room the matron was knitting a red hood when the clang of the bell summoned her to the desk. It was early in the evening, and the night's crop of offenders had not yet begun to be gathered in by the harvesting police. Two hours earlier it would probably have been a shop-lifter; two hours later the matron would have been sure of a poor, hard-featured Phlyne of the streets, or of a drunkard, sodden or shrieking. At eight o'clock, however, there was room for speculation as to what awaited her. When she saw, her professional stolidity was for the moment shaken.

Iron-rimmed spectacles walled in a pair of clear, snapping, kindly old brown eyes; hair soft and white as the silk of the thistle, was primly parted beneath a close, country-made bonnet, and was drawn across the wrinkled forehead and back to a tight little knot; the cheeks and chin where age had set its crepe-like markings were fair with applebloom tints which the matron never saw on even the youngest face in that grim hall. The slack, decent black frock, the big brooch woven of sunny hair, the cashmere shawl about the slim, elderly shoulders, the valise of embroidered canvas—all these were new in the matron's experience.

The sergeant somewhat gruffly stated the charge against the old lady. She was lost. She had been found wandering near the Pennsylvania ferry, inquiring the way to Mystic, Conn. She was Mrs. Elvira Cowslip, and she seemed to be without funds.

'Take her and search her,' he commanded, exasperatedly. 'And try to get her to give you some address to telephone or to telegraph to, if she's telling the truth. She may be just dotty.'

'You'll search a long time, young woman,' said Mrs. Elvira Cowslip, firmly, and as if the matron's forty-five arduous years were a decade or two of summers, 'before you find out anything more than I told that young man.'

'Why,' said the matron, gently, as she led the old lady away, 'what would your folks think if they knew you were in a place like this, a police station?'

'Serve 'em right!' said Mrs. Cowslip, with a glimmer of defiance behind her glasses.

The search revealed nothing of importance. There were a few cents in a limp purse. A tidy flannel night-dress and a sober combing jacket were rolled together with a pair of knitted slippers in the bag, and a pressed glass butter dish was carefully swathed in tissue paper in one corner of it. Mrs. Cowslip's eyes clouded as this was drawn ruthlessly out.

'I'm bringin' it,' she faltered, 'to my own daughter that I'm on my way to see at Mystic. It's my own, I always had the egg money, an' I bought tea with enough of it to get that dish as a premium. Real handsome, ain't it?'

The matron nodded appreciatively.

'But your daughter will be awfully worried when you don't come and she doesn't hear from you,' she urged. Mrs. Cowslip smiled superior.

'She don't know I'm comin', my dear,' she whispered. 'An' if I'd told that young policeman in there her name an' let him telephone to Mystic, she'd just up an' telegraph her father back in—back in where I come from this mornin'. An' I won't have that.'

The matron tried sterner tactics.

'Oh, very well,' she said, with an air of elaborate indifference. 'Just as you please. But I'll have to put you in a cell. This is my room, and there's no place in it for you to sleep or anything. But I'll make you as comfortable as I can in a cell.'

'A cell?' Mrs. Cowslip grew perceptibly taller.

'Yes.' The matron nodded with her most business-like manner. 'I won't lock you up. It isn't a crime to get lost. And you can come around here if you get lonesome or frightened in the night. But there's no other place for you. This isn't a hotel, you know.'

Mrs. Cowslip seemed to waver in her purpose of silence. Then she compressed her lips in token of unchanging resolution and stalwartly followed the matron to the white-washed dungeon in the women's quarter of the prison. But the sight of it unnerved her.

'Oh, I can't, I can't!' she cried, clutching the matron's arm and looking through the grated door in which the key was turning ominously.

'Then just tell us where to telegraph,' said the matron, kindly. 'And if—everything's all right, we'll send you on ourselves.'

'Oh, you don't understand, you don't understand,' half sobbed the older woman.

'Then you come back to my room and tell me all about it, and we'll see if I can't persuade you to let your people know.'

The grimy little room, blocked to overflowing with its stove, its chair, its table, and its shelf where the teakettle stood, seemed homelike to Mrs. Cowslip after the sepulchral whiteness of the empty cell. She warmed her hands at the fire—it was a cold evening in the early autumn—and cast a wistful glance at the kettle. The matron observed it.

'Bless my soul!' she cried, energetically. 'When did you have your lunch?'

'I—I left home in such a hurry—'

'We'll have you a cup of tea in a jiffy,' declared the proprietor of the teapot, as hospitably as if the city paid her to dispense food and drink to her charges. 'Now you tell me all about everything while I put the water on to boil.'

But Mrs. Cowslip did not begin until she had sipped a cup of the steaming beverage and had eaten a slice of the matron's emergency loaf. Then she spoke with heat and bitterness.

'I've stood everything from Luella Johnson—she's Luella Cowslip now, for she married my son John, Dr. John Cowslip he is, and, if I do say it myself, the finest doctor and the best son in—in our part of the country. I've stood everything from her! 'Twas her persuaded father—that's my husband—that he was too old to stay out on the farm alone any longer, an' that we'd better come into the village an' live with her an' John. Now, I knew well enough that I didn't want to live in any other woman's house, but Pa—well, Pa's sort of easy-going.'

'So I should imagine,' nodded the matron, as she took note of Mrs. Cowslip's resolute chin.

'Anyone can wind him around their little finger, an' he sets a good deal of store by Luella. An' I don't say that she wasn't sought after right an' left before John married her. But, anyway, Pa was gettin' old, an' we moves down to Luella's.'

The sunken lips grew a grim line now.

'That girl had more notions than anyone I ever saw. What's that bell, my dear?'

But the matron had vanished to receive the next of her poor prizes from the sergeant. When she returned, she said briefly, 'A prisoner—drunk.' But as she volunteered no more, Mrs. Cowslip went on.

'Didn't believe in fried food—Luella didn't, an' set no store by pies. If that's what comes of sendin' girls to college, I'm glad my Josephine never went, but got married when she was nineteen. But, anyway, when the baby came, it's a blessing Luella didn't kill him. No rockin' him to sleep, she said. No cradle at all, just a crib. Rockin' would make him nervous! Nervous! A baby nervous! Did you ever hear the like of that? An' if he hollers, let him holler! An inhuman mother, I called her, an' an inhuman mother she was.'

The matron shook her head gently.

'They have new ways nowadays,' she said. 'Best let them try them, don't you think?'

'No, I don't! Not on my grandson!' snapped Mrs. Cowslip, her eyes flashing little sparks behind her spectacles. 'Mercy on us! Ain't I brought up three children—one of them the Apaches killed, my dear; he was a soldier, my oldest boy, and only twenty-two, only twenty-two—an' ain't I buried three babies? What experience has Luella Johnson had alongside of me?'

The drunken lady, safe behind the bars, began discordantly to relate the adventures of some one who stood between love and duty. Mrs. Cowslip listened, her face divided between repugnance, fascination, and righteous judgment.

'I never saw a drunken woman in all my life,' she said, solemnly and a little fearfully. 'Oh, it's awful! It's awful! But maybe, if I could see her, I could say something to her to lead her to a better life.'

The matron's discreet lids fluttered down over her shrewd eyes.

'I'm afraid not,' she said, refraining from even an inflectional comment on the connection between missionary zeal and curiosity. 'She's an old hand. But go on about the baby.'

'Oh, he's a dear boy, Mrs.—Mrs. Matron! You'd love him. You've got children of your own, I guess!—she nodded towards the red hood in the matron's indefatigable fingers—'an' you couldn't help but love him. So round an' rosy an' sound an' good natured! But Luella has got no more feelin' fer him than a clock—not a bit. Feeds him on the hour, puts him to sleep on the hour, airs him by the hour! Ugh!'

'For you'll never know a blessing like a mother's love!' wailed the old offender from the corridor of cells, with inebriate pathos.

'Are you sure I couldn't exhort her?' begged Mrs. Cowslip. 'Our minister—maybe you've heard of him, the Rev. Orlando Green? No? Well, he says I have a