

The Storyteller

THE GOVERNESS

'Unsuitable?' echoed Judge Wyckoff, leaning back in his big armchair and thoughtfully stroking his chin. 'Most unsuitable,' repeated Mrs. Colton Colville, most emphatically. 'In fact, Lenville, I will go further and say that as a governess I consider Miss Neville positively injurious to your motherless children.'

'She brought the highest recommendation from the convent where she was educated,' said the Judge, gravely. 'The children are devoted to her and mother loves her as if she were her own.'

'My dear Lenville'—there was a touch of impatience in the lady's tone—'mother is seventy. We cannot expect wisdom or judgment from her any longer. As for the children, Miss Neville spoils them completely.'

'They are very young yet, Caroline.'

'Young!' echoed Mrs. Colton Colville, who, until her marriage two years ago, had been the mistress of her brother's widowed home, and was a power to be reckoned with, even when on a brief visit as at present. 'I am surprised at a man of your intellect, Lenville, being so out of date. As I proved in my paper read before the Congress of Mothers last year, education should begin the first month of the child's life. The brain cells should develop according to regular system. There should be conservation of energy from the first. Most women are absolute idiots on such matters. Think of the awful waste of infantile powers involved in learning such things as "Baa, baa, black sheep," or "Ding-dong, dell!"'

A faint smile trembled on the Judge's lips. He had learned a great deal of 'Mother Goose' himself during the past winter. Miss Neville suggested that juvenile classic as suitable papering for the playroom walls.

Mrs. Colton Colville continued: 'Of pedagogy, as the exact science it has become in our modern schools, your governess knows nothing, Lenville. I found her last night rocking little Wilfrid to sleep in her arms!'

The speaker missed the look that stole over her listener's face at her words. Pale little five-year-old Wilfrid was the darling of his father's heart.

'Rocking is, as you know, condemned by all the best authorities as distinctly injurious to the brain centres. And I understand from Mildred the governess tells fairy stories, one of the most pernicious errors of the past. And when I questioned the children about the physical culture I consider so absolutely necessary, I learn that they found the lessons so tiresome, Miss Neville has given them up, and that instead she plays soldiers with them every night.'

'She does,' assented the Judge. 'I have seen the game, and it is not a bad one. In fact it struck me as a physical drill to gay music, and under a prettier name. The children are, as you know, Caroline, like their poor mother, frail and nervous. Dr. Dent advised a young, cheerful teacher—'

'Young and cheerful perhaps,' interrupted the lady, sharply; 'but not thoughtless and untrained. Miss Neville cannot be more than twenty. What can a girl of twenty know of forming the characters or minds of your children? Absolutely nothing. They are all running wild together.' And a silvery burst of laughter from the lawn without the library window seemed to corroborate the lady's words. 'As you can see for yourself now,' added Mrs. Colton Colville, with a severe glance toward a group under one of the big, spreading oaks.

And looking out, the Judge saw as pretty a picture as unscientific eyes could wish. His three fair little girls dancing in glee about their governess, who had just started to her feet in good humored dismay, as her golden hair, that little Wilfrid had roguishly loosened from the comb, fell in rippling glory almost to her knees. She shook her head gaily at the culprit, and the boy sprang into her arms and covered her face with kisses.

'I suppose this is what Miss Neville calls a morning lesson,' said Mrs. Colton Colville, sarcastically.

'So it seems,' the Judge answered in a low voice.

'Is it little wonder the children are making slow progress. Clearly it is your duty to speak to her in plain terms, Lenville.'

'You think so?' asked the Judge, reflectively stroking his beard.

'Undoubtedly,' continued the lady, 'in justice to your motherless children.'

'If you put it in that light,' said the gentleman, with an odd smile.

'I do most assuredly,' his sister went on. 'The girl is well intentioned, no doubt, and, though unfitted for a teacher—as you observed—'

'Pardon me—as you observed, my dear Caroline,' corrected the Judge, quietly.

'As you please, then,' she continued. 'I was about to say, that, though unsuitable as a governess, there is no doubt some other position she could fill quite—quite acceptably.'

'I am sure of it,' was the quick reply. 'In—in fact, it is a matter I have been thinking over for some time, but—with a man's natural hesitation, I lacked courage to broach the subject to Miss Neville.'

'Then let me do it for you,' said his sister, eagerly. 'I can put the matter before her in a light to which no reasonable woman could object.'

'Impossible, my dear Caroline—impossible!' And the speaker rose as if to terminate the interview. 'I will speak myself, and—at once, I assure you.'

'I don't believe it,' said the lady, as the Judge left the room. 'He will never get up courage to discharge the girl. Men are such fools on such subjects. But if he won't settle the matter, I will!' And Mrs. Colton Colville pressed her thin lips together with the determination of a matron who, having lived in single blessedness for forty years, had learned to have both her will and her way.

The spring twilight was falling over the paling rose of the hills, the air was filled with the breath of lilies, and a pair of mating birds in the tree that brushed the library window were twittering their evening song. Judge Wyckoff sat in his armchair, his eyes fixed upon the one white star trembling in the glow of the West. He was dreaming as he had not dreamed for years; a tender smile played upon his usually grave lips, and the serious face relaxed into almost the gladness of youth; for the Judge had just reduced a mathematical problem that had been troubling him all the winter to very simple terms. Twenty and forty—not an impossible equation in Love's count. Twenty and forty—nothing to hearts that beat as one. Twenty and forty—only the sunlit, flowery stretch 'twixt the budding leaf and the sheltering bough. Twenty and forty—he would settle matters this very night.

So absorbed was the Judge in his calculation that he was unconscious of the soft tap at his library door until it suddenly opened and his children's governess stood before him.

She was in walking-dress. 'Usually she wore white on these balmy evenings when her day's work was done, and seated at the piano in the drawing-room, she sang for his mother the sweet old convent hymns they both loved.'

'I beg pardon,' she began. 'I knocked several times and thought perhaps you were out in the garden. May I speak to you for a few moments?'

'Certainly,' he said, startled into anxiety by something sharp and strange in her tone. 'There is nothing wrong, I hope, with Wilfrid—with the children?'

'Nothing,' she answered. 'Thank God, I leave them all well, perfectly well! I—I—had written a formal resignation—'

'Resignation!' gasped the Judge.

'But, after all your kindness and consideration for the past ten months, I felt something more was due to you—and—to myself,' she added, with quiet dignity. 'It was only a few hours ago that I learned from your sister, Mrs. Colville, that you—you were dissatisfied with my methods and wished to make a change.'

'Dissatisfied! Make a change!' For a moment the Judge stood bewildered, and then his conversation with Mrs. Colton Colville flashed into his mind. Though not a protean man, he had to bite back from his lips. 'She—she told you, then—'

'All,' was the answer, in a tone bravely steadied into calm. 'That I have not been exacting, or exact, I know. But may I explain that, when I first came here, Dr. Dent, your children's physician, had a serious conversation with me. He told me, in plainer terms than he liked to use to you, that they had inherited frail constitutions and extreme nervous excitability; that they must not be forced, or even stimulated, to study; that, pardon me if I now in my own defence repeat his blunt words, they had been most foolishly mismanaged in the past; and their health, perhaps even their lives, depended upon an entire change of influence. He asked me to be less a teacher than an older sister—a loving playmate—a watchful friend. Had I known that this would have been objectionable to you—'

'Objectionable! Great heavens! Objectionable!' interposed the Judge, unable to shape the emotions overmastering him into words.

'I might have used other methods,' continued Miss Neville, her voice a little tremulous. 'But now—now it is too late. The children have learned to love me—'