

The Storyteller

TAMING MRS. TAGGART

To an intense little person like Mrs. Richard Redding the events of every-day life hold possibilities of joy or pain quite incomprehensible to those of more phlegmatic temperament. Her husband, big and unemotional, who could have seen their pretty suburban home burn to the ground with less expenditure of nervous force than she gave to the purchase of a new drawing-room rug, found the infinite variety of her moods an unflinching source of interest.

One crisp October evening she ran to meet him, evidently brimming over with news of great import. But he was late, and as both young people stood in wholesome awe of their cook, it was not until they were seated at the dinner table that he began, tentatively:

'Well, Dot, what now?' Then, as he tasted his first mouthful of soup, he went on: 'Oh, I see! A new soup, isn't it?'

'Now, Dick,' his wife remonstrated, 'I've not been excited over a new soup for ages. You're always making fun of me, but this time you'll have to acknowledge that something really important has happened.'

'Do tell me!' he implored. 'You've got me all nerved up,' as Aunt Melissa used to say.'

'Well,' said Dorothy solemnly, 'Mrs. George Selden was here to-day to tell me that I've been elected one of the managers of the Old Ladies' Home.'

'You don't say so!' exclaimed Dick, startled for once out of his habitual calm. 'What on earth can they want of a kid like you?'

'I wish you wouldn't call me a "kid," Dick,' returned his wife reprovingly. 'Mrs. Selden says that they want to interest young people in the home, and they chose me to be a director because—because they thought the old ladies would like me,' she ended, blushing.

'That's very strange,' said Redding gravely. Then, as she looked at him, half-puzzled, half-appealing, he dropped his bantering tone. 'Of course they'll like you. But can you manage the old ladies, or will they manage you?'

'I don't know,' Dorothy faltered, 'but Mrs. Selden says that it's every one's duty to spend part of one's time in philanthropic work.'

Redding laughed.

'Well, Dot, go ahead, and good luck; but don't let the old ladies and their trials and tribulations get on your nerves.'

A week later Dorothy met him with a troubled face. 'Oh, Dick,' she exclaimed, 'I've been at the home to-day! I was put on a committee to go through the old ladies' closets and bureau drawers; and to reconcile them to this invasion of their privacy we decided to offer a prize of a five-dollar gold piece to the one who kept her room and belongings in the best order. Most of the inmates seemed delighted to throw open their rooms for our inspection, but we have a dreadful time with one of them.'

'This Mrs. Taggart has always been a thorn in the flesh of the directors and matron, for she's been in a constant state of rebellion against the rules ever since she came to the home; and this visit of inspection made her simply furious. She's an energetic little old woman, and though she is over seventy, her hair is black and smooth and shining, and her eyes as sharp as gimlets.'

'They say she's a "perfect staver" at working, so I believe she left her things purposely in disorder. Her room contained the queerest collection of odds and ends you ever saw; it was like nothing so much as a magpie's nest; and among other articles was a most forlorn, moth-eaten fur cape. The other members of the committee decided that the cape was worthless and only bred moths, so they confiscated it, and said that I must take it with me, because as we live in the country I could make a bonfire of it. I never was so scared, for the poor old woman glared like a wild animal deprived of its young. Oh, dear me, Dick, I wish I'd never gone in for philanthropy!'

Redding consoled her as well as he could, but on the day of the next Board meeting she was so late in coming home that he grew quite uneasy, and when at last she appeared, she threw herself into his arms, wailing:

'Oh, Dick, since we took away her fur cape Mrs. Taggart has been acting worse than ever! She was so angry at the old woman to whom we gave the prize—I suppose Mrs. Nixon did give herself airs—that one day,

when the others were at supper, she went into her room and snipped every blossom from a beautiful fuchsia that was the dear old soul's pride and joy.'

Dick chuckled, but Dorothy looked reproachful. 'How can you laugh, Dick?' she asked tragically. 'The managers decided that Mrs. Taggart must be punished by being sent to Coventry for a week or so, and to-day not one of them spoke to her. She was in the hall when we arrived, and the first thing she did was to march straight up to me, lay her hand on my fur coat, and examine it closely. "Pears to me," she said, calmly, "that your jacket's a little mite longer than it was last time you was here, ain't it, Miss Redding?"'

Dick laughed, and Dorothy said reluctantly:

'Of course it was absurd of her to accuse me of piecing out the beautiful seal coat you gave me last winter with that forlorn old catskin cape, and the other directors were in fits of stifled laughter, but when I looked down at her poor wrinkled hand, all crippled with rheumatism, smoothing the soft fur so wistfully, and thought of all I have to make me so happy, and that I'd deprived her of the few relics of a time when life was bright for her, too, I ran out of the house, hid myself in the carriage, and cried all the time that the other directors were holding their meeting. They were very kind to me when they saw how badly I felt, and they explained how necessary it was that discipline should be maintained. I know they're right, but every time I think of that pathetic old hand I'm just heart-broken.'

After dinner Dorothy said wistfully:

'Dick, dear, I've been thinking about Mrs. Taggart, and I've made up my mind that what ails her is that she's just like me.'

'Just like you!' he echoed. 'The idea of that old termagant being like you! What on earth do you mean?'

'I mean that she feels little troubles just the way I do, so we must have the same kind of disposition,' persisted Dorothy earnestly. 'The others are different. They are so glad to know that they will have a good home and care so long as they live that they don't mind little annoyances; but when people are born like Mrs. Taggart and me, it is the little things that count. And Dick,' she added coaxingly, 'would you mind giving me the money you would have spent on a Christmas present for me, and letting me use it to buy Mrs. Taggart a new fur cape?'

Redding pulled out his pocket-book with delightful promptness.

'Oh, Dot, Dot,' he laughed. 'I knew how it would be! Help yourself. But so long as clients continue numerous I shall not allow your vagaries to deprive me of the pleasure of giving my wife a Christmas present.'

Dorothy hugged him. 'I'll take the cape to Mrs. Taggart Christmas morning, and bring her back with me to dinner!' she announced.

'Oh, come now, Dot,' her husband protested, 'that's a little too much!'

'But, Dick,' she said softly, 'think if it were I who was left alone, and old and poor.'

'Don't Dot. I can't endure thinking of a little tender thing like you being left alone.'

'But I shall not always be young, Dick, and we do not know what may come to me "amid the changes and chances of this mortal life."'

'I wish you wouldn't be so fanciful,' he said, frowning impatiently, 'but you may bring on your old lady. On the whole, I'm rather curious to see her,' he conceded.

Christmas morning Mrs. Taggart, according to her invariable habit, had locked and double-locked her door, electing to spend the day in gloom and semi-starvation, thereby reducing the kind-hearted matron to despair. When Mrs. Redding arrived, announcing her intention of taking the old woman home with her to spend the day, Miss Green shook her head.

'It's no use,' she averred. 'Mrs. Taggart won't ever come out of her room on holidays—not even on Fourth of July,' she added, as if that gunpowdery festival of noise and riot was specially dear to the hearts of nervous old ladies.

But Dorothy persevered, and to Miss Green's surprise she heard the bolt drawn and the door cautiously opened. The truth was that the look of sympathy in Dorothy's eyes that day of the directors' meeting had been unmistakable, and Mrs. Taggart could not resist the soft voice.

Nevertheless, when Dorothy entered, tugging a large box, Mrs. Taggart regarded it suspiciously with the expression of some wary little animal not unacquainted with traps.

'I s'pose that's the "good warm shawl" you folks promised me to take the place of that handsome cape!'