



And yet I could not believe that you could
ever care for me — poor little me.

THE CURATE'S DILEMMA.

BY ADELINE SERGEANT.

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The Reverend Edward Crisp was an exceedingly popular young man. Not only in Underwood, but for many miles round, was he known as a capital cricketer, a first-rate tennis player, a good friend, and an excellent preacher. He was not musical, which was a drawback; but, on the other hand, we in Underwood had suffered so much from the pretensions of curates who sang a little, played the flute a little, or intoned a little—through their noses—that we were naturally disposed to look amiably on Mr. Crisp's deficiencies in this respect.

Mr. Crisp had other claims to deference beside mere personal qualities. He came of a good family and had a fairly large private income. His father was a baronet, and, although Edward was only the second son, there was a chance of his succeeding to the title, because his elder brother was unmarried and very delicate. Add to this that Mr. Crisp was very good looking—athletic, muscular, tall, straight-featured and dark-eyed, and you may fancy for yourself the attractions that he possessed in the eyes of all mothers with marriageable daughters in the neighbourhood.

Mr. Crisp was well aware of his dangers, and, as soon as we were friendly, he allowed me to see the light in which he regarded these attempts upon his peace. I do not mean to say that he was coxcomb enough to fancy that every woman he met wanted to marry him, but he saw and resented the fact that deference and attention were paid to him because he had money and social position, not because of what he solemnly considered his "sacred calling." "I wish I hadn't a penny of my own," he said to me one day, in a fervour of vexation; "I wish I had the ordinary curate's stipend and nothing more. It would deliver me from a good deal of fuss and flattery, I am sure."

"What has happened?" I asked.

He was standing on my hearthrug, looking very tall and stiff and black in my pretty little drawing-room, with its many-coloured pots of flowers and light chintz draperies. His short black hair was ruffled, and there was a decided frown upon his brow.

"I know I can trust you, Mrs. Daintrey. It won't go any further, I am sure. I was out this morning, walking with Jones—Mr. Jones, of Cumberly, I mean—"

"The perpetual curate with nine children and two hundred a year? Yes, I know him." I did not add that he wore the shabbiest coat and hat I had ever seen on the back of mortal man calling himself a gentleman.

"Jones is a very good fellow," said Mr. Crisp, as warmly as if I had said something in his dispraise. "He's a thorough scholar—knows a great deal more Greek than I ever did, Mrs. Daintrey! Well, I was walking with him when Lady Blethers passed us, and the moment she saw me she stopped her carriage, and began to talk in a most effusive manner—asked me to a garden party and all that sort of thing? Would you believe it? although Herbert Jones is her parish priest, she only gave him a slight nod, never asked him to the party, and said to me in an undertone that she wondered at my making myself remarkable by going about with that ridiculous little man!"

"Very ill-bred of Lady Blethers," said I, "but everyone is not like her."

"I shall never enter her house again," exclaimed the curate vehemently. "Poor Mr. Jones was very much hurt. But you are right—everyone is not like her. I have found some very true friends in this parish," and he gave me one of those bright smiles of his which were so very winning. "Yourself and the Rector's people."

"And the Elliots," I said, not without malicious intent.

A slight colour rose to the young man's cheek.

"Well, yes, the Elliots," he admitted almost reluctantly.

"I think Dr. Elliott is a man whose friendship is well worth having."

And what about Dr. Elliott's daughter? I said to myself. But Mr. Crisp was not exactly the sort of man to whom one could put such a question, and so I kept it to myself, although the intimacy between the curate and the doctor's family was so pronounced as to have already excited considerable remark in the village.

Dr. Elliott had lost his wife some years before Dr. Crisp came to Underwood. Since Mrs. Elliott's death, the eldest daughter, Mary, had managed the house with great success. She was now seven and twenty, but looked older, and was considered as staid a chaperon to her four younger sisters as the heart of Mrs. Grundy could desire. Alice and Augusta were lively, handsome girls of twenty-three and twenty-one. Alice was engaged to be married, and Gussie was likely to become so very soon. But neither of them could compare for beauty with Dora, the blue-eyed girl of eighteen, who gave promise of a loveliness which, when a little more rounded and developed, was likely to be quite remarkable; and their liveliness might also in time be eclipsed by the sharp wits of Miss Charlotte, the youngest girl of all, who, at the mature age of thirteen, was reported to keep the whole family in order. And it was with Dora that I suspected Mr. Crisp of being in love.

The Elliots were an unworldly set of people. They did not fully recognize the charm of Dora's beauty, and certainly they built no hopes upon it. Dr. Elliott used to shake his head, and Mary would look grave, when a word of admiration reached their ears. "It is sad for a motherless child to be so pretty," I have heard the doctor say. And Mary dropped trite little reflections on the worthlessness of beauty, and the advantage of character over good looks. I believe that they were not in the least degree proud of the girl, as many people would have been; on the contrary, they were vexed and worried at the compliments which they overheard, and tried as much as possible to keep Dora in the background. She was still supposed to be in the schoolroom,