

# MRS. DAINTREY'S NIECE.

BY ADELINE SERGEANT.

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My niece Lisa used always to spend the summer with me, but for the last two or three years, ever since her marriage in fact, I have seen very little of her. Perhaps she does not care to be reminded—as I must necessarily remind her—of certain events which occurred during her latest summer visit to Underwood.

Lisa was a charming person to have in a house. To begin with she was very good to look at, though not strikingly pretty at first sight. Her beauties were of a kind that grew upon you by degrees. For instance, she was very graceful, although her figure was too thin, and she had a very sweet face, but with (I believe) very imperfect features. She had lovely eyes, and fair, silky hair that she disposed with infinite art about her finely-shaped head; and she dressed to perfection, the least detail of her toilet being as carefully studied as the greatest. Anybody can have a pretty frock, but not everybody can choose exactly the right shade and texture of gloves, hose, and handkerchief, nor always use the correct scent, nor chance on the precise knot of ribbon and droop of feather which is the most becoming. Lisa could do all these things, and it was perhaps as much due to her careful dressing as to her features that some people called her beautiful. She gave the same care to her manners and conduct as she did to her dress; they were always creditable to her good taste. She did the right thing as naturally as she drew her breath, and she knew, quite simply and unaffectedly, that she was admired for it.

You see Lisa was not (at the time of which I speak) an immature young girl. She was more than six and twenty, and she had seen a great deal of London society. She had the most supremely finished manner of any woman I ever knew; it was perfectly tranquil, soft and refined. I used to wonder where she had learned it, and came to the conclusion at last that it was a natural gift. I think it was this manner of hers that was so attractive to men. She would listen to the veriest dolt, the most tiresome bore, the rawest schoolboy, with a gracious courtesy which convinced him that he was of all men in the world the most interesting to her. I believe that for the moment he was the most interesting; and therein lay the secret of her power. She was quite sincere, and not at all a flirt; but she certainly had an extraordinary knack of absorbing herself for the time being in the one person to whom she talked.

I came at last to wish that she would get married. The number of broken hearts that strewed her path was really quite absurd. I was half afraid of introducing the new curate, or the doctor's latest assistant, or any of the neighbouring youths. They were sure to fall in love with Lisa Daintrey, be smiled on for a time, and then sweetly repulsed—and I had to bear the blame. Thus it was that when she came to me one June I took an early opportunity of asking her if she were engaged.

"Not just now, dear," said Lisa, in her placid way.

We were sitting under the great mulberry tree in the garden, where the tea tray had been brought out. Lisa was wearing a very charming white gown, with frills of Mechlin lace, and the daintiest of tan-coloured shoes and stockings. She held a fan in her long slender fingers, and waved it delicately before her face as she spoke.

"You have been—or are going to be——"

"I have been engaged three times," said Lisa, looking thoughtfully into the distance with her dreamy blue-grey eyes. "I always found the man uninteresting—dull, in short—as soon as I had promised to marry him."

"Oh, Lisa! How heartless you must be!"

"Would it not have been more heartless to marry a man whom I did not love?" she asked, in her soft, slow tones. "I have never yet met the man who seemed to stir my soul to its profoundest depths. I am sure I could feel more than any man has yet made me feel. I gave these men their chance, and they failed. Aunt Lucy, do you think I am to blame for that?"

She asked the question as if she really cared for my opinion. She always did. Everyone to whom she spoke

was honoured by this appealing, earnest tone. Her enemies called it affected and insincere, but I am sure that they were wrong. Lisa was fond of approbation—that was all.

"But, dear Lisa, suppose you never meet with a man who stirs your soul in the way you speak of, do you mean to live and die an old maid?"

"I suppose not," she said. "I have never had any lack of opportunities of marrying, as yet, but of course I must remember—with a smile—"that I am growing old. I shall be seven-and-twenty next October. Perhaps I ought to put these idle dreams away and accept"—she hesitated a little—"the—chance I have."

"What is the chance, Lisa?" I asked, a little eagerly.

"There is a Mr. Richard Mercier," she said, "who has given me to understand that he would like to marry me. I have not answered him yet; I have asked for time."

"Time for what? Is he not suitable?"

"Oh, quite suitable, dear," said Lisa, with her fine, small smile. "He has a lovely house, and some thousands a year. And I like him—really. He is so cultured, so thoughtful, so sympathetic. I don't think I ever met a man who interested me more. But——"

"But what? He seems to have every possible grace and virtue, unless he is too old or too ugly for you."

"He is thirty-five, and very nice looking. Oh, he has every virtue. I am only afraid that if I accept him he will turn out as uninteresting as—the others."

I laughed. It was impossible not to laugh at the quaint gravity with which she analyzed her own sensations. As I looked at her, leaning back in the low Indian chair, which was so well adapted for displaying the graceful lines of her long, lithe figure, I once more thought her one of the most attractive women I had ever met. Wherever she went, men—and women also—flocked round Lisa like bees about a flower.

"And when is he to have his answer?" I asked.

"When I go back to London—unless he is too impatient, and presses me before. Ah, here comes the teapot."

"And a visitor, if I am not mistaken," I added, looking across the lawn; for in summer I had made a rule of asking certain of my friends to join me in the garden instead of sitting in the drawing-room. My present visitor knew my custom, and had followed the maid at once to the teatable under the mulberry tree.

Lisa put down her fan and glanced at my visitor with gentle interest. I was glad to see it, for I was always fond of Paul Heriot, whose mother had been one of my dearest friends. He was a handsome, powerful-looking man, a little above thirty, very dark, with singularly vivacious dark eyes, and a bright smile, which served to veil the real melancholy of his expression of countenance when the face was seen in repose. He had very good manners and was a capital talker, so I was glad he should appear on the scene when Lisa was present; especially as I considered him—on account of his past history, which I shall postpone for the present—an eminently safe man. She might take as much interest in him as she pleased; she could do no mischief here.

"Are you staying in the village, Paul?" I asked, when the introduction was over and we had settled down to our tea and cake.

"At the Airedale Arms," he said. "I and another man. We have come to sketch, you know."

"Are the pictures going on well?"

"Fairly well, I think. I've nothing to complain of. People talk about the badness of the British market: I think they should rather talk about the badness of the British artist."

"Are you an artist, Mr. Heriot?" said Lisa, in her sweetest voice.

"Only in my way," he said, apologetically. His "way," as I happened to know, was to get two or three pictures on the line every year at the Academy, and as many commissions as he could possibly undertake. And I think Lisa knew this too, as she asked innocently,

"Water-colours?"

"Sometimes. Do you sketch, Miss Daintrey?"

"No, I never do anything," said Lisa, and then she smiled at him in a way with which I was familiar. It seemed to take the person to whom she spoke into her confidence—to establish a special relation between them, as it were. Paul was not proof against the fascination of that smile. I saw him look at her quickly, laugh a little, and involuntarily draw his chair closer to hers. Henceforth I was out of the conversation. Paul and Lisa had it all their own way. I could see that he admired her very much. It was not so easy to tell what she thought of him.

When he was gone—which was not until half-past six—Lisa sat silent for a little while with her eyes fixed dreamily on the green leaves that intervened between her and the blue and golden sky. After a time, she roused herself to ask me a question.

"That is Paul Heriot, the well known artist, is it not? Why does he try to depreciate himself so much?"

"It is a fashion amongst the young men of the present day," I said. "But in him I think it is more than a fashion. I think he is a pessimist and has no heart in his work."

"Why should he be a pessimist?"

"He has had a good deal of trouble. His wife——"

"His wife?" echoed Lisa suddenly, as she sat up and looked at me. "Do you mean that he is married? How odd!" letting herself sink back again. "He has not at all the air of a married man."

"His wife," I continued, "is in a lunatic asylum. She went mad in consequence of her intemperate habits. I have heard that Paul said he would never live with her again, even if she recovered her reason; he was too deeply disgusted by his earlier experiences of their married life. But she will never recover."

"Poor fellow!" said Lisa, softly.

"Oh, I don't think you need pity him. He is well off, young, talented and popular," I said, briskly. "The want of a wife is one which many men find it possible to put up with."

Lisa did not seem to heed my little jibe. She lay still, apparently watching the birds as they flitted from branch to branch of the mulberry tree. "I think your Mr. Heriot very interesting," she said. It was her highest form of praise. She did not always find interesting people at Underwood.

Paul seemed to find her interesting, too. He volunteered to teach her to sketch; but she would not learn. She said, with a graceful movement of her head, that she was too stupid to learn anything. "Why should you learn anything?" I heard him say, with a note of almost passionate admiration in his voice. "You are perfect as you are!"

Later on, he begged to be allowed to sketch her, and then to paint her portrait. After some little hesitation she consented, and Paul established himself on my premises for two or three hours every morning. Of course he was not painting all the time. I heard him reciting poetry, airing his latest opinions, teaching my poodle to beg for biscuits and die for the Queen. The portrait got on very slowly, but Lisa seemed interested and amused. I was glad of that, for I had a good deal of parish work to do at that time, and my mind was somewhat occupied. I was perfectly easy about the two: Paul was a married man—although his wife was in a lunatic asylum—and Lisa's goodness and discretion were admirable. It did occur to me once or twice that Paul's manner was rather overbold, and that Lisa's lowered eyelids and heightened colour betrayed some consciousness of the fact. I noticed, too, that he could not keep his eyes off her if she happened to be within sight; he would gaze at her persistently, as if she were only a picture or a vision from another world, and not a woman of living flesh and blood. But for many a long day I was blind to what all this meant.

I was awakened in this wise. Coming home one afternoon, after a lengthy sojourn in the village, I entered the garden at once and made my way to a sheltered nook, where I saw the glimmer of Lisa's white frock. She was sitting—not under the mulberry tree, where all the world could see her—but in a bower of honey suckle and wild clematis, with her back turned to the house. And there at her feet knelt Paul, with his lips pressed to her right hand, and her left hand gently laid upon his close-cropped dark hair.

I did not go forward. I was a little too much startled