

**THE CURATE IN
CHARGE. IN TWO
VOLUMES. VOL. II**

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The Curate in Charge. In Two Volumes. Vol. II by Mrs. Oliphant

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MRS. OLIPHANT

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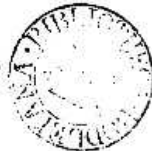
THE
CURATE IN CHARGE.

BY
MRS. OLIPHANT.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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THE CURATE IN CHARGE.

CHAPTER I.

CICELY'S APPEAL.

CICELY ST. JOHN was not in the least beautiful. The chief charm she had, except her youthful freshness, was the air of life, activity, and animation which breathed about her. Dulness, idleness, weariness, langour were almost impossible to the girl—impossible, at least, except for the moment. To be doing something was a necessity of her nature, and she did that something so heartily, that there was nothing irritating in her ac-

tivity. Life (but for bills and debts, and the inaction of others) was a pleasure to her. Her perpetual motion was so easy and pleasant and harmonious, that it jarred upon nobody. When she came out, suddenly stepping from the dining-room window, all the sweetness of the morning seemed to concentrate in this one figure, so bright, so living, so full of simple power; and this, after the sombre agitation and distress in which she had been enveloped on the previous night, was the most extraordinary revelation to the stranger, who did not know Cicely. He could scarcely believe it was the same, any more than a man could believe a sunshiny, brilliant summer morning to be the same as the pallid, rainy troubled dawn which preceded the sun-rising. Cicely had been entirely cast down in the evening; every way of escape seemed to have closed upon her;

she was in despair. But the night had brought counsel, as it so often does; and to-day she had risen full of plans and resolutions and hopes, and was herself again, as much as if there were no debts in her way, as if her father's position was as sure and stable as they had all foolishly thought it. The moment she came into this little group in the garden its character changed. Two poor little startled babies gazing at a man who understood nothing about them, and gazed back at them with a wonder as great as their own, without any possible point on which they could come into contact: this is what the curious encounter had been. Mildmay, as thinking himself much the most advanced being, smiled at the children, and experienced a certain amusement in their bewildered, helpless looks; yet he was not a bit wiser in knowledge of them, in power

to help them, in understanding of their incomplete natures, than they were in respect to him. But when Cicely stepped out, the group grew human. Whatever was going to be done, whatever was necessary to be done, or said, she was the one capable of doing or saying. Her light, firm step rang on the gravel with a meaning in it; she comprehended both the previously helpless sides of the question, and made them into a whole. Her very appearance had brightness and relief in it. The children (as was natural and proper) were swathed in black woollen frocks, trimmed with crape, and looked under their black hats like two little black mushrooms, with their heads tilted back. Cicely, too, possessed decorous mourning for poor Mrs. St. John; but at home, in the morning, Mab and she considered it sufficient in the circumstances to wear black and white prints,

in which white predominated, with black ribbons; so that her very appearance agreed with the sunshine. May would have suited her perhaps better than August, but still she was like the morning, ready for whatever day might bring. Mildmay saluted her with a curious sensation of surprise and pleasure; for this was the one, he perceived at once, who had looked at him with so much hostility — and the change in her was very agreeable. Even the children were moved a little. Charley's mouth widened over his thumb with a feeble smile, and Harry took his gaze from Mildmay to fix it upon her, and murmured "Zat's Cicely," getting over her name with a run, and feeling that he had achieved a triumph. Little Annie, the nursemaid, however, who was jealous of the sisters, appeared at this moment, and led her charges away.