



I AM LOST!

so deep—oh, Lord, have I gone daft?"

"She laughs at me," groaned John Caustic. "She sees that I love her. No wonder she laughs." Mr. Caustic laughed bitterly himself. "To think of her at all is an act of the greatest daring. An old foggy like me, lanky and flabby! She likes men of force. And, Caustic, let me tell you, that you are an unmitigated ass."

Esther was not always busy in the office, and in leisure moments she availed herself of the library, which contained some good books. Once he found Cowper open on her desk, and he thought he saw the stain of a tear upon the page in which the poet addresses the picture of his dead mother.

"She pretends to be superior to sentiment," thought Mr. Caustic; "this is very good."

"I thought you despised poetry, Miss Mayne," said Mr. Caustic one morning shortly afterwards.

"I never said so."

"Did you not ridicule me for being poetical?"

"I would have no right to do that."

"But I think you did it just the same. I see you like Keats, and Tennyson, and Shelley. These are my favorites."

"Can I help that?"

"Come, Miss Mayne, why not be friendly with me? I think you take a delight in distressing me. It would be a great pleasure to me and a great honor, if you could think of me as a friend. I know I am a crusty old fellow."

"I never said so."

"No, you never said so, but I fear you have thought it. And then you admire forceful men, and I fear you think I am a nerveless creature."

"You have no right, Mr. Caustic, to think that I think of you at all."

"You are quite right, it is a great presumption."

"I did not say so, but will you proceed with the article, Mr. Caustic?"

"The article? To the—I have no article in my head, I can't help it, you know, Miss Mayne."

"Can't help what?"

"Can't help thinking of you. I've tried to, but it's no use. I felt from the start that I was lost. I had never been accustomed to the society of women. Your presence in this office seemed to make me young, and put a new heart in my breast. Don't stop me, Miss Mayne, I can't

help it. You seemed to supply something I had missed all my life. As I watched your white fingers flying over the keys, I felt like catching and kissing them. Not a bit of use looking at me like that," said Mr. Caustic, now grown quite reckless. "Reproach me, if you like; call it presumption, what you will. Yes, and your hat, your jacket, your gloves, seemed sweet sentient things to me. All at once, I found my scheme of life inadequate. I hated political lampooning. I dreamt of a home and saw you in it—"

"Mr. Caustic, the article—"

"Confusion seize upon the article! Now, Miss Mayne—Esther—I know I possess nothing which would recommend me to you notice. I am nearly ten years older than you; I am twenty years older in feeling; and instead of having that aggressive, strenuous look which I believe women like to see in a man, I am ridiculously mild and inoffensive looking. Have we nothing, then, in common? You like Keats?"

"Yes."

"You like his 'Ode to a nightingale'?"

"I love it."

"So do I. And Tennyson is your favorite?"

"Yes."

"What of Tennyson's do you like best?"

pose; the delights of rural life; Bulwer Lytton and big squashes?"

"There, there!" cried Caustic, in desperation, "I knew it. Very well; despise me. That, of course, is the only feeling I could possibly evoke in your breast."

Mr. Caustic rose, paced the floor, and folded his arms across his breast with the tragic air of a man who has received his death sentence, but has made up his mind not to give in.

"I never said I despised you. And how do you know what feeling you could possibly evoke in my breast?"

"I know what it is very well."

"No, you don't."

"You despise me, while I love you with all the force of my nature."

"Why do you laugh at me then?" answered Mr. Caustic fiercely. "Why do you make fun of me when I never was so terribly in earnest in all my life? when I love those wretched senseless keys because your fingers have touched them; when I have kept every stump of a pencil you have thrown away for the last two months. Do you think," said Mr. Caustic, in a desperate voice, "that because it is my cursed luck to have to smite people in the paper, that I am destitute of those feelings of—er—tenderness which we

acknowledge to exist in the breast of the coal heaver?"

"I have some sense of humor, Mr. Caustic," Esther gave the editor a quick glance, and then cast down those eyes which had haunted him for the past two months.

"What has that to do with the case?" demanded Mr. Caustic, moodily.

And I have been more accustomed to the intellectual pugilist than to the man of sentiment—"

"What has that—"

"And one may laugh a little at the contrast, without—"

"Without what?"

"Without despising either character."

"Thanks, Miss Mayne, so you don't quite despise me. What a consolation?"

"Don't be sarcastic, Mr. Caustic, sarcasm does not sit well on you."

"Answer me one question, Miss Mayne?"

Mr. Caustic planted himself firmly in front of Esther, who was sitting at the typewriting machine.

"What do you think of me?"

Esther gave him a fleet glance.

"I think—you—are—a—goose—"

"Oh, indeed; oh, very good! ha; ha."

"Not to see" (and the velvet eyes looked full upon him reproachfully)—"that a girl may rail all the better to hide."

"Wait, wait, for God's sake, Esther; give me time to kick myself. I am the greatest donkey—the most unmitigated—to hide what, Esther—to hide what—quick, quick—"

"Her—heart."

"Thank heaven! My glorious darling! What! the lanky, crusty old editor to win a bright beautiful woman!"

There was a smart tap at the door, and then there was the elfin face of the printer's devil.

"Please, Sir, the foreman says he will have to lock up the form if you have not that article ready?"

"The article? Ha, ha! Tell the foreman he may—but no, I'll see him myself."

And then John Caustic did the most daring thing of his life—he stooped down and kissed Esther on the mouth.



PLEASE, SIR, THE FOREMAN SAYS HE WILL HAVE TO LOCK UP THE FORM IF YOU HAVE NOT THAT ARTICLE READY.

"In memoriam."

"So do I. Is not this a something? Does not this constitute a bond between us? And I suppose you were not quite in earnest about married life being a bondage?"

"It frequently is, but I do not think it need necessarily always be so."

"Good, very good. Oh, Miss Mayne—may I—may I hope?"

"Mr. Caustic, do you know that it is now ten o'clock, and you have not dictated a single line of that article on—by the way, what is the subject this morning? something pastoral, I sup-