



MR. CAUSTIC YOU WILL HAVE TO SPRUCE UP.

"His name is Caustic, uncle; such a curious name for one so mild looking."

"Ah, but Esther, do you read the leading articles in the Despatch?"

"No, but I suppose I will soon be writing them from his dictation, for Mr. Caustic said that one of his reasons for employing me was his bad writing. He says the printers are always grumbling at it, and have more than once threatened to strike. 'I don't wonder at the poor devils,' he said, 'for half the time I can't read it myself.'"

"Well, there's not much mildness in his articles I can tell you," said the uncle. "Why, it is vitriol, not ink, with which he writes. He makes the aldermen writhe; he robs the designing contractor of his honest sleep. But when, in his political articles, he comes to deal with the Opposition, there—there he is great. Why," said the old man, rubbing his hands gleefully, as one who tastes a fresh delight through remembrance, "the Despatch just makes the Opposition howl. It uses a rapier, and instead of breaking bones, reaches the vitals at every thrust. Caustic? Ha, ha, a very good name, indeed. Do the Opposition pose as patriots? He tears their mask aside, and reveals them in all their hypocrisy. Do they talk about virtue? He convicts them of the meanest self-seeking. Do they carefully cover the sepulchre with gold leaf? He strips the gilding off, and discloses the skeleton. Mild? Study that fellow, Esther, and tell me what you think of him."

John Caustic, aged thirty, editor of the Montreal Despatch, was as mild a looking fellow as ever made a large population tremble before the editorial "we." He was tall, thin and pale and fair, and his blue eyes, which looked upon life and the despairing persons whom he stabbed to the heart with his blue pencil, were as soft as a baby's before that heartless tyrant has learned all the power of anger which blue eyes can express. His moustache was a little backward, even at thirty, but if this be considered a disadvantage, I hasten to add that he had a straight nose of which, in self-complacent moments, (rare enough, God knows), he was a little proud. Mr. Caustic's brow was regal in its breadth, a palpable suggestion of power. Mr. Caustic wrote articles which made, as Uncle Mayne put it, wrong-doers writhe; but it was his delight to effect this by a biting satire of so subtle and penetrating a sort that it reached the heart without seemingly making visible wounds. But the

face never flushed, the eye never flashed; the countenance expressed, if anything, a mild pity, while the pen, driven at a furious pace, literally wrote death sentences. If Mr. Caustic indulged a fierce delight, it was in profound recesses of his being, from which no sound nor ray of light ever reached to the surface.

"I almost doubt," said Mr. Caustic, looking rather earnestly into the glass in his room at the boarding house, "I almost doubt the wisdom of appointing Miss Mayne to the position. To be associated with a fine young woman so closely even for business purposes will be something new, something, perhaps, disagreeable to me. I suppose I will have to be a little more careful about my dress. I can't smoke, of course; and I suppose I shall have to abandon the luxury of swearing at the dull people who think I have nothing better to do than read their inane stuff. Well—I'm bound to try the experiment. Miss Mayne, I feel sure, is a capable girl. Those black eyes how fearfully they looked at me! Miss Mayne is a fine girl."

Mr. Caustic had arranged a room adjoining his own in the office of the Despatch for Miss Mayne's use. He had a rug put on the floor, and a few prints on the wall. It was not much, but when Esther glanced round the room, noted the desk, typewriter, rug and pictures she gave Mr. Caustic a satisfied look with those big black eyes which had a rather disconcerting effect upon the famous editor.

Mr. Caustic proceeded to dictate an article upon "corruption in politics," which, in its bitter satire, was a revelation to Esther who, looking up from her work now and then, met a pair of the mildest blue eyes that ever were found in a baby's head. She puzzled herself trying to reconcile the contradiction between the eyes and the bitterness she noted in every line she wrote.

"Oh, uncle," cried Esther, upon the evening of the first day spent in the Despatch office, "it is too ridiculous."

"What is too ridiculous?"

"Why, you know, all this ferocity in the Despatch this evening, and all that mildness in Mr. Caustic's blue eyes."

"Well, this affords an interesting study. You expect a tepid flow from a man like this, and he gives you a flood of lava. You look for a combination of works without backbone, and he smites with the terse epigram. Did I not say study this Mr. Caustic?"

"Why, uncle, this man who wields such a power, to whom a manufacturer's deputation to-day was so humble, whose words are like death sentences—I do not seem to be afraid of. Is that not ridiculous? But I must tell you, uncle, that, looking at him while, with eyes staring at vacancy, he launches his most withering satire at the heads of the corrupt politicians, I could hardly keep from laughing. Of course, this was a very wicked and dreadful feeling. But why should a man whose business it is to say such cruel things have such babyish blue eyes? Why should a man look benignant when he is smiting his fellow mortals to the earth? Why should nature have given Mr. Caustic the aspect of Tom Pinch while at

the same time she egged him on to be an intellectual pugilist, delighting in the carnage of the pen? Shall I tell you something, uncle?" Esther leaned a little across the tea table. "I suspect that this doughty editor, who, as mild looking as a young lamb, makes everybody tremble, is—is—afraid of me. There!"

"Nonsense, child."

"No nonsense, uncle," replied Esther, with a very musical laugh. "He's an old bugbear, you know, uncle, and I saw that the idea of having a woman near him quite put him out. I have not a great deal of experience, but I know that helpless look in men when they see, by hat, jacket and gloves, that a woman has taken possession. And I found him watching me in a doubtful, scared sort of way. Am I not wicked, uncle? But, there, I always tell you everything, and it is only my nonsense."

"I am not sure about it."

That was what Mr. Caustic said to himself many times upon the evening of that first day's work in company with Esther. "There is the constraint of the situation. My articles to-day were unusually poor. I knew that as I went on. I fear I can never dictate with success. When I wanted to burn the rascals as with aquafortis, I found those big, dark eyes fixed upon me, and then it seemed so asinine to have a quarrel with anybody. Look here, Caustic," jumping up suddenly and regarding himself fiercely in the mirror of the bedroom, "don't make an ass of yourself."

The next morning a bunch of lilies of the valley graced Esther's desk.

As the days went on there was a noticeable



I HAVE NO ARTICLE IN MY HEAD TO-DAY, MISS MAYNE.

change in the tone of the articles in the Despatch. At first, perhaps, this would not have been observed, but in the course of a fortnight, the editorials were charged with such a spirit of conciliatoriness as surprised and disgusted a great many readers who looked regularly to the Despatch for their "seasoning," as the readers of the Saturday Review look to that journal for malignant cynicism.

"I am losing my grip," Mr. Caustic told himself many times during this fortnight. "Where is my power of invective? How is it that I no longer feel a fierce delight in killing the tricksters with an epigram? How is it that instead of that biting satire which I could use when alone, I now coo as mild as a sucking dove? Miss Mayne is a fine girl; those dark eyes—confound it, I believe I have thought of nothing else since I first saw them. And I think—I think," said Mr. Caustic, very sternly, "that Miss Mayne sees a certain hollowness in this