

# THE STORY BEHIND THE SLIDES: CAUDLE'S CURTAIN LECTURES

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**CAUDLE'S CURTAIN LECTURES** was a set of eight slides produced by W. Butcher & Sons of London as part of their 'Primus Junior Lecturer' series (set number 607, series B). This series of eight-slide transfer slides was introduced around the end of the nineteenth century and remained in production until the end of the 1920s, possibly later. The Caudle set first appeared between 1900 and 1907. The little-known London slide producer Poulton & Son also issued an earlier set of the same title – possibly a Life Model set, since their catalogue subtitles the set 'From Life' – but consisting of nine slides. The stories for both sets were identical, except that the Poulton set had an extra initial slide introducing the two main characters of the stories. Readings for both these sets are in the Society's Slide Readings Library. Other manufacturers may have produced the same title.

*Caudle's Curtain Lectures* consists of a series of incessant petty lectures delivered by Mrs Caudle to her husband in the matrimonial bed each evening. *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines a 'curtain lecture' as 'a wife's reproof to her husband in bed' and explains the etymology: 'so called because it was originally given in a curtained bed'. The first use of the term in the English language is dated to 1633.

Mr and Mrs Caudle and the Curtain Lectures were created by Douglas William Jerrold (1803–57), the son of an actor who ran a theatre in Sheerness, Kent (see fig.1). Jerrold learned to read and write at an early age, and taught himself Latin, French and Italian. However, he was no stranger to the gritty side of life and served as a midshipman in 1815. Later, he moved with his poverty-stricken family to London, where he was apprenticed to a printer.

He wrote his first play in 1818, though it was not staged until 1821, when it appeared at Sadler's Wells under the title *More Frightful than Hurt*. It was successful enough to be translated into French and then retranslated into English under the title *Fighting by Proxy*, although Jerrold did not devote himself fully to playwriting until 1825. Over the

next ten years his plays were produced at a number of London theatres including the Coburg, Drury Lane, the Surrey, the Adelphi and later the Strand Theatre, which he managed jointly with his brother-in-law from 1836.

One evening at the beginning of June 1841 Douglas Jerrold, Mark Lemon and Henry Mayhew met at the Edinburgh Castle Inn in the Strand, London, to discuss the possibility of starting a new comic journal. Lemon and Mayhew were both reforming liberals and the plan was to combine humour and political comment. Among those invited to the meeting was John Leech, a medical student whose drawings had impressed Lemon. During the meeting, someone remarked that a humorous magazine, like good punch, needed lemon. Mayhew remarked, 'A capital idea! Let's call the paper 'Punch'.'

Thus *Punch*, or the *London Charivari*, the famous illustrated magazine of humour, was founded, the first number being published on 17 July 1841. At first a strongly radical journal, it gradually mellowed in outlook. In December 1842, owing to financial difficulties (although early numbers sold 6,000 copies a week, sales of at least 10,000 were needed to cover costs), the firm of Bradbury & Evans, printers and publishers, acquired the magazine.

Jerrold's association with *Punch* arose not so much from his work in the theatre, but rather from his journalistic writing and work in the printing industry. He contributed to a number of weekly papers, including *The Ballot* and the *Weekly Times*, as well as *Blackwood's Magazine* and the *Freemasons' Quarterly* (membership of the Freemasons is a recurring theme in the Caudle 'lectures'). His contributions to *Punch* began with the second issue and continued until shortly before his death. Jerrold wrote several other serial works for *Punch*, yet none was as popular as 'Mrs Caudle's Curtain Lectures'. More humorous and less satirical than most of Jerrold's work, this series made *Punch's* fortune. Jerrold produced a total of 36 lectures, together with a Foreword and a Postscript. They were printed in consecutive issues of *Punch*, beginning with the issue of 4 January 1845, for which it was the opening item. The stories ran through Volumes 8 and 9 over an eighteen-month period into 1846. By May 1845 the lectures were being serialised in *The Living Age* magazine, published in New York, and quickly became familiar to American readers.

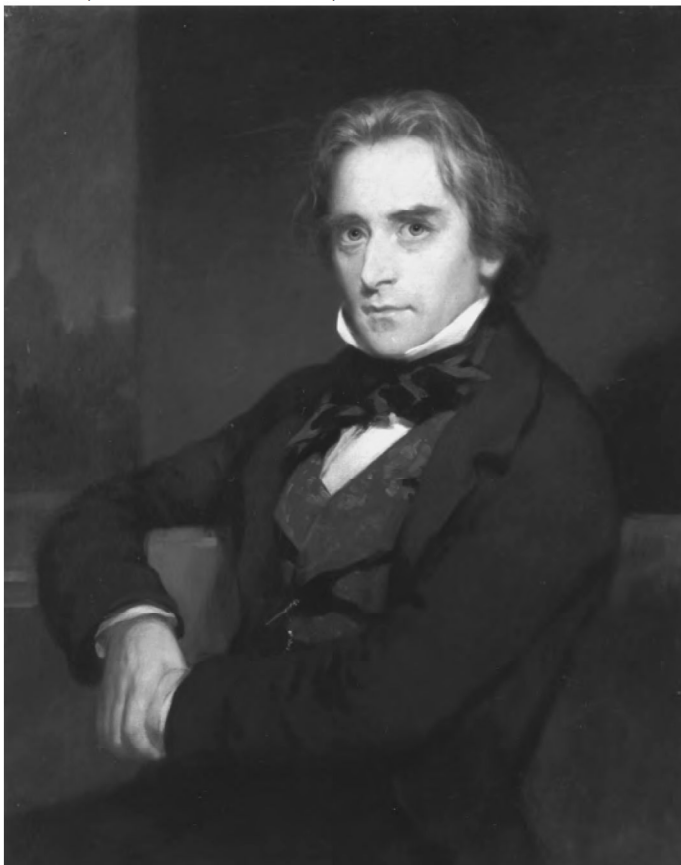
Bradbury & Evans issued the *Curtain Lectures* as a book in 1846. In 1866 they issued a deluxe edition, bound in leather, with an inventive cover design (by John Leighton) whose chief feature, apart from the elaborate blocking on the borders, was a four-poster bedstead with heavy drapes framing the title blocked in gold. *Caudle's Curtain Lectures* have since been reprinted by at least 30 publishers in the UK, USA and Australia, at dates between 1846 and 1984 (when they appeared with an introduction by Anthony Burgess). The most recent edition was published in 2000 with an introduction by the English author Peter Ackroyd. Today the complete texts can be found on the Internet and are even available for downloading in a hand-held pocket-computer format.

*Caudle's Curtain Lectures* became a well-known and recognised part of British humour. In the twentieth century they were the subject of comic postcards (see fig. 2). As late as 1915 Raphael Tuck & Sons issued an 'Oilette' postcard titled 'Mrs Caudle's Curtain Lectures'



2. Comic postcard, 'Mrs Caudle's Curtain Lectures'. Publisher unknown, UK, 1910s

1. Douglas Jerrold, from a painting by Sir Daniel Macnee. Courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery, London





which showed two collie dogs in bed, with the caption 'Caudle, you're enough to vex a saint! Now don't think you're going to sleep; because you're not!' This was 70 years after they first appeared.

The later Lectures were accompanied by illustrations from Charles Keene (1823–91), an illustrator who worked for *Punch* for many years. He was connected with a group that included George du Maurier, Linley Sambourne and Sir John Tenniel, and was highly regarded: James McNeill Whistler described him as the greatest English artist since Hogarth. He was awarded a Gold Medal at the Paris Exhibition of 1889 and had a great influence on artists of the next generation.

The lectures themselves have titles such as 'Mrs Caudle "Has Been Told" that Caudle Has "Taken To Play" at Billiards,' "Mrs Caudle Suggests that her Dear Mother should come to Live with Them" and 'Mr Caudle has Lent an Acquaintance the Family Umbrella'. Every evening Mr Caudle retires to bed to be confronted by his wife in a bad mood, having waited all day for the opportunity to unload all her complaints and grievances. Caudle listens silently or feigns sleep. For example, in a lecture entitled 'Mr Caudle joins a Club – "The Skylarks"':

*Well, if a woman hadn't better be in her grave than be married! That is, if she can't be married to a decent man. No; I don't care if you are tired, I shan't let you go to sleep. No, and I won't say what I have to say in the morning; I'll say it now. It's all very well for you to come home at what time you like – it's now half-past twelve – and expect I'm to hold my tongue, and let you go to sleep. What next, I wonder? A woman had better be sold for a slave at once.*

*And so you've gone and joined a club? The Skylarks, indeed! A pretty skylark you'll make of yourself! But I won't stay and be ruined by you. No I'm determined on that. I'll go and take the dear children, and you may get who you like to keep your house. That is, as long as you have a house to keep – and that won't be long, I know.*

*How any decent man can go and spend his nights in a tavern! – oh, yes, Mr. Caudle; I dare say you do go for rational conversation. I should like to know how many of you would care for what you call rational conversation, if you had it without your filthy brandy-and-water; yes, and your more filthy tobacco-smoke. I'm sure the last time you came home, I had the headache for a week. But I know who it is who's taking you to destruction. It's that brute, Prettyman. He has broken his own poor wife's heart, and now he wants to – but don't you think it, Mr Caudle; I'll not have my peace of mind destroyed by the best man that ever trod. Oh, yes! I know you don't care so long as you can appear well to all the world, but the world little thinks how you behave to me. It shall know it, though – that I'm determined.<sup>1</sup>*

3. Primus Caudle's Curtain Lectures set, slide 1:  
Mr Caudle simulates sleep.



4. Primus set, slide 5:  
'the disgraceful state of the man speaks for itself'.



5. Primus set, slide 8:  
a discussion on the subject of the baby's name.



Lester Smith collection

The series immediately made the nation laugh. A historian of *Punch* observed that 'it created a national furore and set the whole country laughing and talking. Other nations soon took up the conversation and the laughter and "Mrs Caudle" passed into the popular mind and took a permanent place in the language in an incredible short space of time.'<sup>2</sup> Jerrold's son Blanchard Jerrold, in his biography of his father, noted that Mrs Caudle was 'welcomed by the laughing thousands'.<sup>3</sup>

The reasons for her success are explained in the introduction of the Poulton slide reading:

*Each married man amongst us feels sure he himself has not experienced a lecture such that we shall relate to you, yet he is certain that his friends Smith, Jones and Robinson have. In Victorian social life everyone could point at their next-door neighbour's wife and see Mrs Caudle. Something still true to this day.*

Jerrold remarked of his hero:

*Mr Caudle was blessed with an indomitable constitution. One fact will prove the truth of this. He lived thirty years with Mrs Caudle, surviving her... When Mr Job Caudle was left in this briery world without his daily guide and nocturnal monitress, he was in the ripe fullness of fifty-two. For three hours at least after he went to bed – such slaves are we to habit – he could not close an eye. His wife still talked at his side. True it was she was dead and decently interred. His mind – it was a comfort to know it – could not wander on this point; this he knew. Nevertheless his wife was with him. The Ghost of her tongue still talked as in the life, and again and again did Job Caudle hear the monitions of by-gone years.<sup>4</sup>*

Regrettably, the illustrations used for the Primus lantern slides (see figs 3–5) were not reproductions of Charles Keene's original artwork and the artist is unknown. The slides and their readings cover eight separate Curtain Lectures, although two slides use different parts of one story. This seems a curious decision given that 36 lectures were originally written.

Far from being a simple set of humorous magic lantern slides, the Primus Junior Lecturer set of *Caudle's Curtain Lectures* is a mirror of middle-class Victorian society and humour. It forms part of a long tradition of British humour at the expense of man's image of his neighbour's wife (a more recent example would be Flo in the 'Andy Capp' cartoons by Reg Smythe). It also demonstrates the wonderful comic genius of Douglas Jerrold, sadly now virtually forgotten.

**Mark BUTTERWORTH** has been a member of the Magic Lantern Society for two years. After many years working in the Far East he now lives in Scotland and spends his time buying and selling scientific instruments (especially magic lanterns and slide rules) on the Internet.

## NOTES

1. Douglas Jerrold, 'Mr Caudle Joins a Club – "The Skylarks"', *Punch* Vol. 8 (1845), 62.
2. M.H. Spielmann, *The History of 'Punch'* (London: Cassell, 1895), 291.

3. Blanchard Jerrold, *The Life and Remains of Douglas Jerrold* (London, 1859).
4. Douglas Jerrold, foreword to 'Caudle's Curtain Lecture', *Punch* Vol. 8 (January 1845).