

THE BACHELOR HUSBAND.

A celebrated painter of Madrid, whose real name it will be more discreet not to disclose, but whom I shall call Morales, had just completed a superb picture for the convent of the Escorial. He had received a large sum of money for his work, and by way of a little relaxation after the long continued toil bestowed upon it, he had assembled around a well-spread table a few choice spirits from among his fellow artists. It was a bachelor entertainment. Not a lady was to sit down with them. Even the mistress of the house herself, Donna Casilda, had been excluded. Morales had sent her off with her maid to pass the day with one of her cousins.

But Donna Casilda, having a little curiosity in her composition, was very anxious to know what was to take place in her absence, and had a strong desire to find out what so many men could have to talk about when there were no women present. Instead, therefore, of remaining at the house of her cousin she quickly returned, bringing the latter with her, and the two were presently ensconced in a little closet adjoining the studio, where with eye and ear closely applied to the keyhole they remained eagerly listening to all that passed.

'But tell us, my friend,' said one of the guests, 'why are we deprived of the pleasure of Senora Morales' company? Surely her beauty and wit would not have diminished the charm of the delightful meeting.'

'There,' whispered the lady to her cousin, 'that is the first sensible speech I have heard.'

'Bosh!' replied the husband, pouring out a glass of golden sherry, 'women know nothing of the poetry of life.'

'That is true,' added another: 'women are mere matter-of-fact beings—commonplace, essentially prosaic. What do they know about the arts, or the enjoyments of artists?'

'Fools!' exclaimed Casilda.

'Yes,' continued Morales, 'take from women love, intrigues and household affairs and they absolutely have nothing that they can think or talk about.'

'Impertinent fellow!' was the comment of the listeners.

'Why,' added the painter, 'they cannot comprehend a rich joke or one of those capital pieces of humour which the air of the studio inspires. They cannot appreciate them. When a woman plays us a trick it is always at the expense of our honour.'

'Wretch!' This word escaped the two cousins at the same instant, and was uttered in a loud tone. But the noise of the guests and the rattling of glasses prevented its being heard. 'Ah, Master Simple, and so you defy us to play you a trick without touching your honour, do you? By our Lady of Atocha, I vow that before Lent is over I will have my revenge.'

Casilda set her wits to work, and you shall hear what came of it. On the following Thursday she engaged her brother to procure from the Palace Cabeda, where they are accustomed to sell fragments of old buildings, a door of the same dimensions as their own which fronted on the street. She charged him to get one of an antique pattern, covered with iron work and heavy mouldings. This she had conveyed to her house with all secrecy, and kept closely concealed until the favourable moment. She had communicated her design to her brother and a few friends in the neighbourhood, on whose aid she relied in carrying out her plot. On a certain evening when Morales had returned home at a late hour from a convent where he had just completed the painting of a chapel, which the monks were to have opened at Easter, Casilda received him with much warmth, and a greater profusion of caresses than usual. It was very late when they retired to rest, for Morales must first have his supper.

The night was cold and stormy. Towards midnight Morales' wife began to utter deep groans, intermingled with piercing cries, as if suffering intense pain.

'Holy Mother!' exclaimed she, 'I am dying. My dear husband, my last hour is come!'

Her husband in consoling tones tried to quiet her.

'I can bear it no longer,' she cried. 'Get me a confessor—the sacraments! It is almost over with me!'

At these cries the domestics hastened to her assistance; but nothing relieved the sufferer. Poor Morales,

though sore against his will, was forced to leave his bed.

'I know what it is that ails you, mistress,' said the girl. 'It is that bad vinegar you mixed with the salad. You know it served you the same way last time. Mother Castinoja cured you then.'

The painter at this began to scold his wife because experience had not made her more careful, but she only sobbed out in half-suffocated words:

'Al hecho no ay remedio.' What is done cannot be undone. For mercy's sake, go for Mother Castinoja. She is the only one who can give me relief. Bring her quickly, or there will be nothing left for you but to open my grave.'

'My little wife,' replied her husband, in a dismal tone, 'my dearest wife, Mother Castinoja has moved to the other end of the city; the night is very cold, and the rain is pouring in torrents. Even if I could find Mother Castinoja, do you think she would come to see you through this terrible storm? Compose yourself, my dear, and do not force me to take such a long walk, which I am sure will be of no use.'

At this Casilda began to sob anew.

'See what a husband God has given me! I only ask him to go for a nurse at the risk of wetting his shoes and he refuses. But I know what it is you want—you wish to be a widow and live over again your bachelor life. Ah, I am dying! A priest! I'm poisoned!'

Morales, really believing that his wife was at the last extremity, and fearing if she died that the accusations she had thrown out against him



DR. FITCHETT: "Doctor of Law." MRS FITCHETT: "A Girard." Hermann, Photo., Wellington.



MISS BROWNE: "Music."



MISS RINGWOOD: "Rajah's Daughter."

N.Z. Photo. Co., Wellington.

SOME OF THE DRESSES AT THE LATE BALL, GOVERNMENT HOUSE, WELLINGTON.

might have serious consequences, endeavoured to soothe her by caresses and prepared to light a lantern. He then drew on a pair of stout boots, threw a cloak over his shoulders, and manfully set forth on his nocturnal expedition in search of Mother Castinoja.

The painter knew that she lived somewhere in the Rue Poncearral, but of the precise location he was totally ignorant. The rain fell in torrents. The night was as dark as Egypt, and Morales cursed the day on which he was married. It may readily be imagined that in such a mood he was not likely to find the object of his search.

But while he is groping along the streets let us return to the sick lady. No sooner did she see her husband fairly off on his expedition than she summoned her brother and a few chosen friends who were lying hid in the cellar. In a twinkling they had the old street door off its hinges and its place supplied by the one bought for the occasion. Above it they placed a huge white sign, on which was displayed in large letters the fol-

lowing inscription:

'The Hotel of the Cid. Good Entertainment for Man and Beast!'

This done, a large party of friends from the neighbourhood who had been let into the secret were speedily assembled. Castanets and guitars were put in requisition. A repast was prepared, and the merry guests began to eat, drink and dance by way of celebrating the dismal expedition of the poor husband who had gone in search of Mother Castinoja.

Meanwhile, having proceeded from street to street, and roused and angered the whole neighbourhood, our good painter was at length obliged to return without the nurse. He was drenched to the skin, and his patience was completely exhausted. On approaching his house the sound of musical instruments, singing and peals of laughter burst upon his astonished ears. Thinking he had made a mistake he raised the lantern, and discovering a different door from his own, with the sign of a hotel over it, he became completely bewildered, and began to traverse the pavement anew.

'It is indeed the Rue de Lapaire,' said he. 'Here is the bookstore of Pedro Truppal, and this is the house of Diego le Boiteux, and then surely comes mine.' He recognised the doors of all his neighbours—his alone was changed.

'God help me!' said he, making fifty signs of the cross, 'this indeed must be my house. It is but an hour and a half since I left it. My wife was then weeping and groaning with pain, and now they are singing and dancing. I have never noticed a tavern in this street, and surely it is not in my house they would establish one.'

He began to make a closer examination, passing his hand over the door, but could not find the knocker.

At last, determining to make himself heard in hopes that as soon as he effected an entrance he would learn the cause of this mysterious transformation, he began to thump on the door with blows loud enough to rouse the whole neighbourhood.

The merry-makers within pretended not to hear him.

He knocked still more loudly.