

The Devil's Mother-in-Law

By Fernán Caballero

In a town, named Villagañanes, there was once an old widow uglier than the sergeant of Utrera, who was considered as ugly as ugly could be; drier than hay; older than foot-walking, and more yellow than the jaundice. Moreover, she had so crossgrained a disposition that Job himself could not have tolerated her. She had been nicknamed "Mother Holofernes," and she had only to put her head out of doors to put all the lads to flight. Mother Holofernes was as clean as a new pin, and as industrious as an ant, and in these respects suffered no little vexation on account of her daughter Panfila, who was, on the contrary, so lazy, and such an admirer of the Quietists, that an earthquake would not move her. So it came to pass that Mother Holofernes began quarrelling with her daughter almost from the day that the girl was born.

"You are," she said, "as flaccid as Dutch tobacco, and it would take a couple of oxen to draw you out of your room. You fly work as you would the pest, and nothing pleases you but the window, you shameless girl. You are more amorous than Cupid himself, but, if I have any power, you shall live as close as a nun."

On hearing all this, Panfila got up, yawned, stretched herself, and turning her back on her mother, went to the street door. Mother Holofernes, without paying attention to this, began to sweep with most tremendous energy, accompanying the noise of the broom with a monologue of this tenor:—"In my time girls had to work like men."

The broom gave the accompaniment of *shis, shis, shis*.

"And lived as secluded as nuns."

And the broom went *shis, shis, shis*.

"Now they are a pack of *fools*."—*Shis, shis*.

"Of idlers"—*Shis, shis*.

"And think of nothing but husbands.—*Shis, shis*

"And are a lot of good-for-nothings."

The broom following with its chorus.

By this time she had nearly reached the street door, when she saw her daughter making signs to a youth; and the handle of the broom, as the handiest implement, descended upon the shoulders of Panfila, and effected the miracle of making her run. Next, Mother Holofernes, grasping the broom, made for the door; but scarcely had the shadow of her head appeared, than it produced the customary effect, and the aspirant disappeared so swiftly that it seemed as if he must have had wings on his feet.

"Drat that fellow!" shouted the mother; "I should like to break all the bones in his body."

"What for? Why should I not think of getting married?"

"What are you saying? You get married, you fool! not while I live!"

"Why were you married, madam? and my grandmother? and my great grandmother?"

"Nicely I have been repaid for it, by you, you sauce-box! And understand me, that if I chose to get married, and your grandmother also, and your great grandmother also, I do not intend that you shall marry; nor my granddaughter, nor my great granddaughter! Do you hear me?"

In these gentle disputes the mother and daughter passed their lives, without any other result than that the mother grumbled more and more every day, and the daughter became daily more and more desirous of getting a husband.

Upon one occasion, when Mother Holofernes was doing the washing, and as the lye was on the point of boiling, she had to call her daughter to help her lift the caldron, in order to pour its contents on to the tub of clothes. The girl heard her with one ear, but with the other was listening to a well-known voice which sang in the street:—

“I would like to love thee,
Did thy mother let me woo!
May the demon meddle
In all she tries to do!”

The sound outside being more attractive for Panfila than the caldron within, she did not hasten to her mother, but went to the window. Mother Holofernes, meanwhile, seeing that her daughter did not come, and that time was passing, attempted to lift the caldron by herself, in order to pour the water upon the linen; and as the good woman was small, and not very strong, it turned over, and burnt her foot. On hearing the horrible groans Mother Holofernes made, her daughter went to her.

“Wretch, wretch!” cried the enraged Mother Holofernes to her daughter, “may you love Barabbas! And as for marrying—may Heaven grant you may marry the Evil One himself!”

Sometime after this accident an aspirant presented himself: he was a little man, young, fair, red-haired, well-mannered, and had well-furnished pockets. He had not a single fault, and Mother Holofernes was not able to find any in all her arsenal of negatives. As for Panfila, it wanted little to send her out of her senses with delight. So the preparations for the wedding were made, with the usual grumbling accompaniment on the part of the bridegroom’s future mother-in-law. Everything went on smoothly straightforward, and without a break—like a railroad—when, without knowing why, the popular voice—a voice which is as the personification of conscience,—began to rise in a murmur against the stranger, despite the fact that he was affable, humane, and liberal; that he spoke well and sang better; and freely took the black and horny hands of the labourers between his own white and beringed fingers. They began to feel neither honoured nor overpowered by so much courtesy; his reasoning was always so coarse, although forcible and logical.

“By my faith!” said Uncle Bias; “why does this ill-faced gentleman call me Mr. Bias, as if that would make me any better? What does it look like to you?”

“Well, as for me,” said Uncle Gil, “did he not come to shake hands with me as if we had some plot between us? Did he not call me citizen? I, who have never been out of the village, and never want to go.”

As for Mother Holofernes, the more she saw of her future son-in-law, the less regard she had for him. It seemed to her that between that innocent red hair and the cranium were located certain protuberances of a very curious kind; and she remembered with emotion that malediction she had uttered against her daughter on that ever memorable day on which her foot was injured and her washing spoilt.

At last, the wedding day arrived. Mother Holofernes had made pastry and reflections—the former sweet, the latter bitter; a great *olla podrida* for the food, and a dangerous

project for supper; she had prepared a barrel of wine that was generous, and a line of conduct that was not. When the bridal pair were about to retire to the nuptial chamber, Mother Holofernes called her daughter aside, and said: "When you are in your room, be careful to close the door and windows; shut all the shutters, and do not leave a single crevice open but the keyhole of the door. Take with you this branch of consecrated olive, and beat your husband with it as I advise you; this ceremony is customary at all marriages, and signifies that the woman is going to be master, and is followed in order to sanction and establish the rule."

Panfila, for the first time obedient to her mother, did everything that she had prescribed.

No sooner did the bridegroom espy the branch of consecrated olive in the hands of his wife, than he attempted to make a precipitous retreat. But when he found the doors and windows closed, and every crevice stopped up, seeing no other means of escape than by passing through the keyhole, he crept into that; this spruce, red-and-white, and well-spoken bachelor being, as Mother Holofernes had suspected, neither more nor less than the Evil One himself, who, availing himself of the right given him by the anathema launched against Panfila by her mother, thought to amuse himself with the pleasures of a marriage, and encumber himself with a wife of his own, whilst so many husbands were supplicating him to take theirs off their hands.

But this gentleman, despite his reputation for wisdom, had met with a mother-in-law who knew more than he did; and Mother Holofernes was not the only specimen of that genus. Therefore, scarcely had his lordship entered into the keyhole, congratulating himself upon having, as usual, discovered a method of escape, than he found himself in a phial, which his foreseeing mother-in-law had ready on the other side of the door; and no sooner had he got into it than the provident old dame sealed the vessel hermetically. In a most tender voice, and with most humble supplications, and most pathetic gestures, her son-in-law addressed her, and desired that she would grant him his liberty. But Mother Holofernes was not to be deceived by the demon, nor disconcerted by orations, nor imposed upon by honeyed words; she took charge of the bottle and its contents, and went off to a mountain. The old lady vigorously climbed to the summit of this mountain, and there, on its most elevated crest, in a rocky and secluded spot, deposited the phial, taking leave of her son-in-law with a shake of her closed fist as a farewell greeting.

And there his lordship remained for ten years. What years those ten were! The world was as quiet as a pool of oil. Everybody attended to his own affairs, without meddling in those of other people. Nobody coveted the position, nor the wife, nor the property of other persons; theft became a word without signification; arms rusted; powder was only consumed in fireworks; prisons stood empty; finally, in this decade of the golden age, only one single deplorable event occurred . . . the lawyers died from hunger and quietude.

Alas! that so happy a time should have an end! But everything has an end in this world, even the discourses of the most eloquent fathers of the country. At last the much-to-be-envied decade came to a termination in the following way.

A soldier named Bríónes had obtained permission for a few days' leave to enable him to visit his native place, which was Villagañanes. He took the road which led to the lofty mountain upon whose summit the son-in-law of Mother Holofernes was cursing all mothers-in-law, past, present, and future, promising as soon as ever he regained his power to put an end to that class of vipers, and by a very simple method—the abolition of

matrimony. Much of his time was spent in composing and reciting satires against the invention of washing linen, the primal cause of his present trouble.

Arrived at the foot of the mountain, Briónes did not care to go round the mountain like the road, but wished to go straight ahead, assuring the carriers who were with him, that if the mountain would not go to the right-about for him he would pass over its summit, although it were so high that he should knock his head against the sky.

When he reached the summit, Briónes was struck with amazement on seeing the phial borne like a pimple on the nose of the mountain. He took it up, boked through it, and on perceiving the demon, who with years of confinement and fasting, the sun's rays, and sadness, had dwindled and become as dried as a prune, exclaimed in surprise:—

“Whatever vermin is this? What a phenomenon!”

“I am an honourable and meritorious demon,” said the captive, humbly and courteously. “The perversity of a treacherous mother-in-law, into whose clutches I fell, has held me confined here during the last ten years; liberate me, valiant warrior, and I will grant any favour you choose to solicit.”

“I should like my demission from the army,” said Briónes.

“You shall have it; but uncork, uncork quickly, for it is a most monstrous anomaly to have thrust into a corner, in these revolutionary times, the first revolutionist in the world.”

Briónes drew the cork out slightly, and a noxious vapour issued from the bottle and ascended to his brain. He sneezed, and immediately replaced the stopper with such a violent blow from his hand that the cork was suddenly depressed, and the prisoner, squeezed down, gave a shout of rage and pain.

“What are you doing, vile earthworm, more malicious and perfidious than my mother-in-law?” he exclaimed.

“There is another condition,” responded Briónes, “that I must add to our treaty; it appears to me that the service I am going to do you is worth it.”

“And what is this condition, tardy liberator?” inquired the demon.

“I should like for thy ransom four dollars daily during the rest of my life. Think of it, for upon that depends whether you stay in or come out.”

“Miserable avaricious one!” exclaimed the demon, “I have no money.

“Oh!” replied Briónes, “what an answer from a great lord like you! Why, friend, that is the Minister of War's answer! If you can't pay me I cannot help you.”

“Then you do not believe me,” said the demon, “only let me out, and I will aid you to obtain what you want as I have done for many others. Let me out, I say, let me out.”

“Gently,” responded the soldier, “there is nothing to hurry about. Understand me that I shall have to hold you by the tail until you have performed your promise to me; and if not, I have nothing more to say to you.”

“Insolent, do you not trust me then!” shouted the demon.

“No,” responded Briónes.

“What you desire is contrary to my dignity,” said the captive, with all the arrogance that a being of his size could express.

“Now I must go,” said Briónes.

“Good-bye,” said the demon, in order not to say *adieu*.

But seeing that Briónes went off, the captive made desperate jumps in the phial, shouting loudly to the soldier.

“Return, return, dear friend,” he said; and muttered to himself, “I should like a four-year-old bull to overtake you, you soulless fool!” and then he shouted, “Come, come, beneficent fellow, liberate me, and hold me by the tail, or by the nose, valiant warrior;” and then muttered to himself, “Some one will avenge me, obstinate soldier; and if the son-in-law of Mother Holofernes is not able to do it, there are those who will burn you both, face to face, in the same bonfire, or I have little influence.”

On hearing the demon’s supplications Briónes returned and uncorked the bottle. Mother Holofernes’s son-in-law came forth like a chick from its shell, drawing out his head first and then his body, and lastly his tail, which Briónes seized; and the more the demon tried to contract it the firmer he held it.

After the ex-captive, who was somewhat cramped, had occasionally stopped to stretch his arms and legs, they took the road to court, the demon grumbling and following the soldier, who carried the tail well secured in his hands.

On their arrival they went to court, and the demon said to his liberator:—

“I am going to put myself into the body of the princess, who is extremely beloved by her father, and I shall give her pains that no doctor will be able to cure; then you present yourself and offer to cure her, demanding for your recompense four dollars daily, and your discharge. I will then leave her to you, and our accounts will be settled.”

Everything happened as arranged and foreseen by the demon, but Briónes did not wish to let go his hold of the tail, and he said:—

“Well devised, sir, but four dollars are a ransom unworthy of you, of me, and of the service that we have undertaken. Find some method of showing yourself more generous. To do this will give you honour in the world, where, pardon my frankness, you do not enjoy the best of characters.”

“Would that I could get rid of you!” said the demon to himself, “but I am so weak and so numbed that I am not able to go alone. I must have patience! that which men call a virtue. Oh, now I understand why so many fall into my power for not having practised it. Forward then for Naples, for it is necessary to submit in order to liberate my tail. I must go and submit to the arbitration of fate for the satisfaction of this new demand.”

Everything succeeded according to his wish. The princess of Naples fell a victim to convulsive pains and took to her bed. The king was greatly afflicted. Briónes presented himself with all the arrogance his knowledge that he would receive the demon’s aid could give him. The king was willing to make use of his services, but stipulated that if within three days he had not cured the princess, as he confidently promised to, he should be hanged. Briónes, certain of a favourable result, did not raise the slightest objection.

Unfortunately, the demon heard this arrangement made, and gave a leap of delight at seeing within his hands the means of avenging himself.

The demon’s leap caused the princess such pain that she begged them to take the doctor away.

The following day this scene was repeated. Briónes then knew that the demon was at the bottom of it, and intended to let him be hanged. But Briónes was not a man to lose his head.

On the third day, when the pretended doctor arrived, they were erecting the gallows in front of the very palace door. As he entered the princess’s apartment, the invalid’s pains were redoubled and she began to cry out that they should put an end to that impostor.

“I have not exhausted all my resources yet,” said Bríones gravely, “deign, your Royal Highness, to wait a little while.” He then went out of the room and gave orders in the princess’s name that all the bells of the city should be rung.

When he returned to the royal apartment, the demon, who has a mortal hatred of the sound of bells, and is, moreover, inquisitive, asked Bríones what the bells were ringing for.

“They are ringing,” responded the soldier, “because of the arrival of your mother-in-law, whom I have ordered to be summoned.”

Scarcely had the demon heard that his mother-in-law had arrived, than he flew away with such rapidity that not even a sun’s ray could have caught him. Proud as a peacock, Bríones was left in victorious possession of the field.