

The Jealous Old Man

1615

An Interlude

by

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Dramatis Personae

Canizares, an old man

His friend

Dona Lorenza, the wife of Canizares

Cristina, her niece

Hortigosa, a neighbor

A young man (who does not speak)

(Enter DONA LORENZA, her niece, CRISTINA, and HORTIGOSA, her neighbor.)

DONA LORENZA It's a wonder, Señora Hortigosa, that my husband didn't lock the door; curse him! I declare to God he has driven me daft! This is the first day since I married him that I've had a chance of speaking with a soul outside the house. I'd like to see the old curmudgeon under the sod, and the man who tied me up with him!

HORTIGOSA Come, come, my dear, no need to tear your hair and wring your hands. When the pot is worn out, you can always buy a new one.

DONA LORENZA That's the kind of rigmarole and proverb they drummed into my ears to bamboozle me. A thousand curses on his money -- barring the crosses on the back -- to hell with the jewels and all the finery he unloads on me and promises to give me. None of them have done me a pennyworth of good: what use is all that wealth when I'm as poor as a church mouse and famished in the midst of plenty?

CRISTINA Indeed, you're right, aunt; and as for myself, I'd rather go about with a rag in front and one behind, provided I had a young husband, than to see myself bedded and befouled by the rotten old scarecrow you took as husband.

DONA LORENZA I took him, niece? Not on your life! I was delivered over to him by one whose word was law, and I as a dutiful girl was quicker to obey than to contradict. But I'm telling you if I had known as much then as I do now, I would have bitten off my tongue, rather than have said "yes," which will cost me three thousand years' repentance. But I suppose it was all in the cards, and had to be, so it's no good crying over spilt milk.

- CRISTINA God bless us and save us, what a nasty old man he is! All the night long you hear him saying: "Hand me the chamber pot; put away the chamber pot; quick, little Cristina, warm up some cloths, I've a troublesome colic; fetch me those rushes, my gallstones are giving me twinges." Surely there are more medicines and ointments in the bedroom than in a druggist's shop, and here am I who hardly know how to dress myself, obliged to be his nurse. Ugh! It turns my stomach! He's an old wreck, as moldy as he is jealous; there's no one alive more jealous than he is!
- DONA LORENZA That's the simple truth, niece.
- CRISTINA I wish to God this weren't the truth.
- HORTIGOSA All right, Dona Lorenza, if you follow my advice, you'll soon see how your luck will change. The young fellow I have in mind is as upstanding and sinewy as a mountain pine: he knows how to make love, and he's a model of discretion, and ever so grateful for all that's done for him. And seeing that the old curmudgeon's jealous nature doesn't give us a chance to write letters or get answers, it's up to you to cheer up and put on a bold face, and following my plan, I'll bring the young fellow to your room, aye, and shuffle him out of there too, even if the old blighter had more eyes in his head than many-eyed Argus, and had more clairvoyance than one of those wizards who are supposed to see seven leagues underground.
- DONA LORENZA As I'm a novice to such matters, I'm timid, and I'm against risking my reputation just for a lark.
- CRISTINA I'm sure of one thing: if I were in your place, I'd make no bones about doing everything Señora Hortigosa says, without missing one point.
- DONA LORENZA And where would my honor be, niece?
- CRISTINA What about the fun we'd have?
- DONA LORENZA And suppose we are found out?
- CRISTINA Suppose we aren't?
- DONA LORENZA Who'll guarantee we shan't be found out?
- HORTIGOSA Who? Why, careful planning, caution, and above all, boldness and my scheming.
- CRISTINA Now mind, Señora Hortigosa, that you bring us a lover who is clean-limbed, free and easy, on the bold side, and above all, young.
- HORTIGOSA The fellow I have in mind has all those qualities, and two extra ones; he is rich and a good spender.

- DONA LORENZA Wealth doesn't mean a thing to me, Señora Hortigosa. In this respect I'm as happy as any girl can be, and long live Canizares, say I, for he dresses me up like a doll, and I've more jewels to wear than you would find in a rich silversmith's shop window. If only he wouldn't nail up the windows, lock the doors, watch the house day and night, and drive away tomcats and dogs, simply because they are males, I'd do without his gifts and generosities.
- HORTIGOSA Is he then so jealous?
- DONA LORENZA Well, the other day they tried to sell him a piece of tapestry at a bargain price, but because it had human figures designed on it, he refused to buy it, and he chose another one of foliage pattern which was more expensive and not so attractive. There are seven doors to pass, in addition to the hall door, before one can get to my room, and every one of them has a lock and key. Bless me if I can find where he hides the keys at night.
- CRISTINA Aunt, I believe he hides the master key in the folds of his nightshirt.
- DONA LORENZA Don't you believe it, niece; I sleep with him and I've never seen or felt a key on him.
- CRISTINA But that's not all, for all the night long he's roaming all over the house like a ghost; and if any people are serenading in the street, he flings stones at them to drive them away. He's a nasty warlock, and he's an old man; that's the worst I can say of him.
- DONA LORENZA Señora Hortigosa, best for you to be off now; otherwise the old grumbler may find you with me. That would upset all of our plans. But if you intend to do anything, do it as soon as you can; I'm so desperate that I've a mind to slip a rope around my neck and make an end for good and all.
- HORTIGOSA You'll soon cease to be depressed when your good time begins; then you'll revive and take a rosier view of life.
- CRISTINA I sincerely hope this happens, even if I have to lose a finger off my hand. I'm very fond of my dear aunt, and it drives me distracted seeing her so worried and woebegone in the power of that doddering, dithery old dolt -- I can't stop calling him old.
- DONA LORENZA Yet he is very fond of you, Cristina.
- CRISTINA Does that stop his being old? Besides, I've always heard that old men are fond of young girls.
- HORTIGOSA That is true, Cristina. Good-bye, I'll be back after supper. Now you, señora, consider carefully our plan and you'll realize that you stand to gain by it.
- CRISTINA Señora Hortigosa, please bring a nice little friar for me to have some sport with.
- HORTIGOSA I'll bring the little girl the portrait of one to pin up.

CRISTINA A picture of one is no good to me: I want a live lusty little one -- a regular treasure.

DONA LORENZA But suppose your uncle sees him?

CRISTINA I'll tell him he's a ghost, and he'll be scared, and I'll have my fun.

HORTIGOSA I promise you I'll bring you one. Good-bye.

(Exit HORTIGOSA.)

CRISTINA Now, aunt, if Hortigosa brings you a lover and me a little friar, and if uncle sees them, all we have to do is for all of us to seize him, choke him, and throw him down the well, or bury him in the stable.

DONA LORENZA So that's the kind of girl you are; I believe you would do it, too.

CRISTINA Well, let the old blighter not be jealous, then, and allow us to live in peace; we don't harm him, and we behave like saints.

(Exeunt.)

(Enter CANIZALES, an old man, and his FRIEND.)

CANIZALES My friend, when a man of seventy marries a girl of fifteen, he either is a fool or he wants to set out for the next world as soon as possible. No sooner did I marry the girl Lorenza, hoping to find in her a helpmate and a companion who would be at my bedside and close my eyes when I die, than I was overwhelmed by worries of every kind. I owned a house, but I landed myself with a household; I was lodged, but I am now dislodged.

FRIEND Yes, my friend, you made a mistake but not a great one; for as the Apostle Paul has said, it is better to marry than to burn.

CANIZARES There was nothing in me to burn, my friend, for the tiniest flame would reduce me to ashes. I wanted companionship. I sought companionship, and I found companionship. May God help me.

FRIEND Are you jealous, friend?

CANIZARES Yes, of the sun that shines on Lorencica, of the breeze that touches her, of the skirts that cling to her limbs.

FRIEND Does she give you cause for jealousy?

- CANIZARES Not in the least. She has no reason to, no way to, no time to, nor any place to. The windows, in addition to being fastened, are protected by bars and shutters: the doors are never opened: no woman of the neighborhood crosses my threshold, or ever shall as long as I am alive. Reflect, my dear friend: temptations do not enter the minds of women from taking part in festivals or processions or any public gatherings; where thy stumble and come to grief is in the homes of their neighbors and friends. More wickedness is hidden by a bad woman friend than by the cloak of night itself, and more intrigues are planned in her house than in an assembly.
- FRIEND I am sure of it. But if Dona Lorenza never leaves the house, and no one enters it, what worries you?
- CANIZARES Lorenza will soon discover what she is missing and that will be a disaster, and such a disaster that the mere thought makes me afraid, and my anxiety drives me to despair, and my despair plagues my life.
- FRIEND It is natural for you to be apprehensive, for women would wish to enjoy the pleasures of matrimony to the full.
- CANIZARES My wife enjoys them doubly.
- FRIEND Ah, so there is the snag, my friend?
- CANIZARES Not at all: for Lorenza is more innocent than a dove, and up the present she has no notion of such complexities. Well, God be with you, my friend, I must be getting home.
- FRIEND I want to go with you, and meet your wife.
- CANIZARES I must remind you, friend, of the ancient Latin proverb that says: Amicus usque ad aras, meaning "A friend as far as the altar," and implying that a friend is obliged to do any service for his friend except what is against the laws of God. So I say, my friend, usque ad portam, up to the door, for no one shall cross my threshold. So farewell friend, and forgive me.
- (Exit CANIZARES.)*
- FRIEND I have never in all my life seen a man more cautious or more senseless. He, doubtless, is one of those who go through life dragging their own rope after them for hanging; one of those who in the end die of the disease they are afraid of.
- (Exit FRIEND.)*
- (Enter DONA LORENZA and CRISTINA.)*
- CRISTINA Aunt, uncle is very late, and Hortigosa is still later.

DONA LORENZA I wish he'd never come, or she either, for he infuriates me, and she disturbs me.

CRISTINA One must try anything once, aunt: if it turns out badly, let it go.

DONA LORENZA Ah, niece! In this kind of affair, if I'm not mistaken, the danger lies in trying it at all.

CRISTINA I must say, aunt, you've no courage; if I were your age no men would scare me, no matter how massive their attributes.

DONA LORENZA Again, I repeat, and I'll say it a hundred thousand times, that Satan uses you as his mouthpiece. But what's that? How did the master get in?

CRISTINA He must have let himself in with the master key.

DONA LORENZA The Devil take his masteries and his keys.

(Enter CANIZARES.)

CANIZARES Whom are you talking to, Lorenza?

DONA LORENZA To Cristina.

CANIZARES Be careful what you say, Lorenza.

DONA LORENZA I repeat, I was talking to Cristina; who else could it be? Have I anybody else?

CANIZARES I wouldn't like you to be talking aloud to yourself, and saying things that might be harmful to me.

DONA LORENZA I don't understand all your roundabout phrases, and I don't want to, and for goodness sake let us spend the feast in peace and amity.

CANIZARES I wouldn't fight with you on St. John's Eve. But who's knocking so loudly at the door? See who it is, Cristina: if it's a beggar, give him some alms and send him away.

CRISTINA Who's there?

HORTIGOSA Your neighbor, Hortigosa, Cristina.

CANIZARES Hortigosa, a neighbor? Heaven help me! Ask her, Cristina, what she wants, and give it to her, provided she doesn't cross the threshold.

CRISTINA What do you want, dear neighbor?

CANIZARES The very word neighbor gives me the creeps; call her by her right name, Cristina.

- CRISTINA What do you want, Señora Hortigosa?
- HORTIGOSA I want to beg a favor from Señor Canizares: my very life and soul are at stake.
- CANIZARES Tell that lady, niece, that both of mine too are at stake, and more than that, to keep her from coming in here.
- DONA LORENZA Goodness gracious, what a strange person you are! Am I not here in front of you? Are people going to gobble me up with their eyes, or whisk me away through the air?
- CANIZARES Let her in and a hundred thousand devils with her, since you insist! Come in, neighbor. What a sinister omen that word neighbor is to me!
- (Enter HORTIGOSA carrying a large hanging of tapestry and embossed leather. On the four leather corners are painted the celebrated knights Rodomonte, Mandricardo, Ruggiero and Gradasso. Rodomonte is represented as muffled in a cloak.)*
- HORTIGOSA My dear sir, hearing of your noble reputation for charity, alms and good works, I have dared to come and beg you to do me the great favor and charity of buying from me this hanging. A son of mine is in prison because he wounded a cloth-shearer, and the magistrate has ordered the surgeon to give evidence in this case, and I have no money to pay him with; and the youth is in danger of being liable for other fines, and there may be a lot of them, for he's a bit of a scapegrace, and I'd like to get him out of jail today or tomorrow, if possible. The tapestry is a fine artistic work, and it is brand new, but I can let you have it for whatever you are willing to give me, as it's a question of more importance than mere money, and I've sacrificed many such things in my life. Now, hold up that corner, my lady, and let's unfold it, so that Señor Canizares may see that I'm not cheating him. Hold it up higher, señora, and look how it hangs at full-length. And the paintings in the squares look as if they were alive.
- (As she raises the hanging, to show it off, a young man slips into the room behind it. CANIZARES, meanwhile, who is examining the tapestry, says:)*
- CANIZARES What a handsome Rodomonte! But what does such a muffled gentleman in my house? If he realized what I feel about such goings on and masquerades, he'd get a fright.
- CRISTINA Uncle, I've not the foggiest notion about muffled men and masquerades, but if one came into the house, Señora Hortigosa is to blame; may the Devil carry me away if I ever said or did anything to bring him in here. No, upon my conscience, it would be the Devil's own handiwork if my uncle were to blame me for his coming in.
- CANIZARES I'm well awared, niece, that Señora Hortigosa is to blame, but this is not surprising, for she doesn't know my prejudices, and how I loathe such paintings.

- DONA LORENZA *(aside)* He's referring to the painting, Cristina, not to something else.
- CRISTINA *(aside)* I am referring to the paintings. Ah, Heaven help me! My heart was in my mouth! I thought I was going to swoon!
- DONA LORENZA *(aside)* Blast that blundering, gaping mouth of yours! That's what comes of consorting with babes in arms.
- CRISTINA *(aside)* What an idiot I was! I might have toppled over the whole house of cards!
- CANIZARES Señora Hortigosa, I've a rooted objection to muffled figures or those that are going to be muffled. Take this doubloon, which will see you through your difficulties, and leave my house as fast as you can, that is to say, this instant, and take your hanging away with you.
- HORTIGOSA I wish you a longer life than Methuselah of Jerusalem by the side of this dear lady ... I don't know her name, but I entreat her to call on me at any hour of day or night: I'll serve her with my body and soul, and I'm certain that her soul must be as spotless as a cooing turtledove's.
- CANIZARES Señora Hortigosa, cut your cackle and be off, and stop passing judgements on other people.
- HORTIGOSA If you, my lady, need a little sticking plaster for female troubles, I have some infallible samples; or if your teeth ache, I know a few magic charms that check the pain in a second.
- CANIZARES Cut it short, Señora Hortigosa. Dona Lorenza has no female ailments, and no trouble with toothaches: all her teeth are sound as a bell, and no one has ever been pulled.
- HORTIGOSA She will have some drawn in time, if heaven is kind, for she will live a long life, and old age plays havoc with one's teeth.
- CANIZARES God help me, is there no way I can get rid of this pest of a neighbor? Hortigosa, you she-devil of a neighbor, or whatever you are, clear out to hell and leave me in peace in my home!
- HORTIGOSA Your request could not be more reasonable, so keep your hair on, dear sir, I'm off.
(Exit HORTIGOSA)
- CANIZARES Oh, those accursed neighbors! I'm singed by her specious words just because they were uttered by a neighbor.
- DONA LORENZA I do declare you're a boor and a savage. What did our neighbor say to make you so venomously spiteful against her? Why you even turn your decent actions into a mortal sin. You gave her two dozen royals trimmed with two dozen insults, you malicious, foul-mouthed slanderer!

- CANIZARES Tut, tut, it's an ill wind -- and I suspect there's mischief in the offing. I don't like hearing you defend your neighbor so heatedly.
- CRISTINA Aunt, why not go into your bedroom to calm down; leave uncle alone, as he seems to be in a huff.
- DONA LORENZA I'll follow your advice, niece, and mind you, he won't set eyes on me for the next two hours. I'll make him drain the cup to the dregs, no matter how he tries to reject it.
- (Exit DONA LORENZA)*
- CRISTINA Uncle, did you not hear her bang the door? Why, I believe she is getting a prop to fasten it.
- DONA LORENZA *(from within)* Cristina, Cristina!
- CRISTINA What do you want, Auntie?
- DONA LORENZA If you could only see what a handsome young lover my good luck has brought me! Young, attractive, sleek, dark-haired, and his breath smells like orange blossom!
- CRISTINA Heavens! what madcap tomfoolery is this? Scold her, uncle, tell her she shouldn't say such naughty things, even as a joke.
- CANIZARES Don't be a fool, Lorenza! I'm in no mood to put up with such jokes.
- DONA LORENZA This is no joke; I'm in dead earnest. There is no greater truth than this one for me this moment.
- CRISTINA Goodness gracious, what childishness! But tell me, auntie, is my little friar there, too?
- DONA LORENZA No, niece; but our neighbor Hortigosa will bring him along next time.
- CANIZARES Lorenza, say anything you wish, but don't utter again that word neighbor; I get goosebumps when I hear it.
- DONA LORENZA I'm all of a dither for love of my neighbor.
- CRISTINA Auntie, dear, what foolish talk and childishness is that?
- DONA LORENZA Now I'm finding out what you really are, you accursed old man: up to today, I've been fooled by you!
- CRISTINA Scold her, uncle! Scold her! She's a shameless hussy!

DONA LORENZA I'm now going to wash the sprouting beard of my lover in a basin of scented manna water, for his face is truly angelic.

CRISTINA Heavens! what mad talk, what foolishness! Tear her limb from limb, uncle!

CANIZARES I won't tear her to pieces, but I'll tear down the door that hides her.

DONA LORENZA No need to do so: I've opened it. Come in, and you'll see that I've told you the truth.

CANIZARES I know you're joking, but I'll come in, just to calm you down.

(As CANIZARES enters the room, DONA LORENZA throws a basin of water in his eyes. He starts to wipe his face, CRISTINA and DONA LORENZA both go for him, and in the confusion, the YOUNG MAN escapes.)

CANIZARES By God, Lorenza, you almost blinded me! Only the Devil prompts horseplay that endangers a person's eyesight.

DONA LORENZA Look what kind of man my ill luck gave to be my husband, the most suspicious man in all the world. Look how he believed my lying stories, just because he was so crazed by jealousy ... truly am I to be pitied! I wish I could tear out my hair to chastise myself for marrying this old man! I'd cry my eyes out to wash away the faults of that cursed spouse of mine! See what value he sets on my honor and my reputation, when he tries to turn his foul suspicion into certainty, his lies into truth, jests into truth, and sport into cursing! Alas, my heart will break!

CRISTINA Auntie, don't shout so loud, the whole neighborhood will be in an uproar.

(Voices off stage.)

FRIEND Open the door! Open at once, or I'll break it down!

DONA LORENZA Open it, Cristina, and let everyone witness my innocence, and the cruelty of this old man.

CANIZARES I swear, I thought you were joking. Calm down, Lorenza!

(Enter the FRIEND and HORTIGOSA.)

FRIEND What's happening here? Who's quarreling? Who was shouting?

CANIZARES It is nothing, my friend: just a disagreement between husband and wife, and it's soon over.

FRIEND I was next door at a betrothal, and heard the shouting, and rushed over here thinking it was serious.

- HORTIGOSA I thought so, too, as sure as I'm a sinner.
- CANIZARES The fact is, Señora Hortigosa, all this would not have happened but for you.
- HORTIGOSA That's it; my sins were the cause. I was born under an evil star, and people are always blaming me for what others do.
- CANIZARES Please, both of you, return to your homes. I'm grateful for your intentions. My wife and I have made up.
- DONA LORENZA Yes, I'll forgive him, provided he first of all begs this good neighbor's pardon for having had uncharitable thoughts about her.
- CANIZARES If I had to beg pardon from all the women of the neighborhood whom I think evil, I should never finish. Nevertheless, I now beg Señora Hortigosa's pardon.
- HORTIGOSA And I grant it here, in the presence of Pedro Garcia.
- CANIZARES I sincerely trust you are now aware of all the troubles and tribulations a neighbor woman brought upon me, and you agree that I'm right to be on bad terms with the whole tribe of neighbor women.
- DONA LORENZA My spouse may shun the neighbors, but I kiss hand to all of you.
- CRISTINA And I, too; but if my neighbor had brought me my dainty little friar, I'd have cherished her as still a better neighbor. So farewell, dear neighbors!

THE END