

MRS HINIJER ACTS.

XLIV.

Mrs Hinijer surprised the Vicar by tapping at his study door after tea.

"Begging your pardon, Sir," said Mrs Hinijer. "But might I make so bold as to speak to you for a moment?"

"Certainly, Mrs Hinijer," said the Vicar, little dreaming of the blow that was coming. He held a letter in his hand, a very strange and disagreeable letter from his bishop, a letter that irritated and distressed him, criticising in the strongest language the guests he chose to entertain in his own house. Only a popular bishop living in a democratic age, a bishop who was still half a pedagogue, could have written such a letter.

Mrs Hinijer coughed behind her hand and struggled with some respiratory disorganisation. The Vicar felt apprehensive. Usually in their interviews he was the most disconcerted. Invariably so when the interview ended.

"Well?" he said.

"May I make so bold, sir, as to arst when Mr Angel is a-going?" (Cough.)

The Vicar started. "To ask when Mr Angel is going?" he repeated slowly to gain time. "Another!"

"I'm sorry, sir. But I've been used to waitin' on gentlefolks, sir; and you'd hardly imagine how it feels quite to wait on such as 'im."

"Such as ... 'im! Do I understand you, Mrs Hinijer, that you don't like Mr Angel?"

"You see, sir, before I came to you, sir, I was at Lord Dundoller's seventeen years, and you, sir--if you will excuse me--are a perfect gentleman yourself, sir--though in the Church. And then...."

"Dear, dear!" said the Vicar. "And don't you regard Mr Angel as a gentleman?"

"I'm sorry to 'ave to say it, sir."

"But what...? Dear me! Surely!"

"I'm sorry to 'ave to say it, sir. But when a party goes turning vegetarian suddenly and putting out all the cooking, and hasn't no proper luggage of his own, and borry's shirts and socks from his 'ost, and don't know no better than to try his knife at peas (as I seed my very self), and goes talking in odd corners to the housemaids, and folds up his napkin after meals, and eats with his fingers at minced veal, and

plays the fiddle in the middle of the night keeping everybody awake, and stares and grins at his elders a-getting upstairs, and generally misconducts himself with things that I can scarcely tell you all, one can't help thinking, sir. Thought is free, sir, and one can't help coming to one's own conclusions. Besides which, there is talk all over the village about him--what with one thing and another. I know a gentleman when I sees a gentleman, and I know a gentleman when I don't see a gentleman, and me, and Susan, and George, we've talked it over, being the upper servants, so to speak, and experienced, and leaving out that girl Delia, who I only hope won't come to any harm through him, and depend upon it, sir, that Mr Angel ain't what you think he is, sir, and the sooner he leaves this house the better."

Mrs Hinijer ceased abruptly and stood panting but stern, and with her eyes grimly fixed on the Vicar's face.

"Really, Mrs Hinijer!" said the Vicar, and then, "Oh Lord!"

"What have I done?" said the Vicar, suddenly starting up and appealing to the inexorable fates. "What HAVE I done?"

"There's no knowing," said Mrs Hinijer. "Though a deal of talk in the village."

"Bother!" said the Vicar, going and staring out of the window. Then he turned. "Look here, Mrs Hinijer! Mr Angel will be leaving this house in

the course of a week. Is that enough?"

"Quite," said Mrs Hinijer. "And I feel sure, sir..."

The Vicar's eyes fell with unwonted eloquence upon the door.