

Theophilus—that you love me,” said Mrs. Sampson. “And now, I suppose——”

“Now, Lavinia, the happiness of my life is to be accomplished, like the roofing of a house, and we ought to hang out a flag. Ah! the history of Theophilus and Lavinia—Paul and Virginia—is the history of many engagements. I came, like Cæsar; I saw, like Caius Julius Cæsar; I conquered, also like C. J. C. Then I was defeated, unlike that commander: then I conquered again. Once more the enemy was too strong. Augustus the Great was master of the fort. Again I retreated. Again I present myself. Lower the portcullis: blow the trumpets: the fort surrenders.”

“Henry!—I mean Theophilus.”

By this time he had his arm round her waist, so far as it would go, and was timing his sentences by nothing less than kisses on her cheek.

“And now we are actually going to be married, Lavinia, after so many disappointments, it is not unnatural that one should feel the suddenness of the thing. It takes me in the legs. When I think of it, they go groggy. Where do you feel it?”

“Henry—I mean Theophilus—in the head.”

“I can hardly believe my own happiness. There is sure to be another cup between the slip and the lip. I mean, of course, Lavinia—only one is nervous on such an occasion—another lip between the cup and the slip. Another lip? Whose lip? Let me have his blood.”

“Tranquillise yourself, dear Henry—I mean Theophilus.”

“Twice already has the bowl been raised to my lips, twice to be dashed away. I should have been called Tantalus Bodkin. Tantalus! How well it would look at the bottom of a new prospectus! Tantalus Bodkin, Esq., Bank Side, Hades, secretary *ad interim*.”

“Come, Theophilus, do not be nervous. Will you stay to luncheon?”

“I cannot, Lavinia, I really cannot, I have so much to do.”

“Then let me ring for a glass of sherry?”

“You may, Lavinia; and, if I may venture a hint from my own experience, it will be to ask, not for the Deputation Sherry, which I know too well, but for some of Sir Jacob’s own.”

Lavinia smiled and rang the bell, and gave

the directions. The sherry was brought, and with it, though not, so to speak, a part of it, came Reuben Gower with John.

“You are in time, Mr. Gower,” said Bodkin enthusiastically, “to drink a glass of sherry with me. This is *not* the Deputation Sherry, I assure you, but some of Sir Jacob’s own particular. See how it sticks to the side of the glass, oily, and what a perfume? Nutty!” All this time he was rolling the glass round in his fingers. “The Spanish walnut seems to have lent its choicest flavour to the Spanish grape. Take a glass, Mr. Gower, if I, a guest myself, may invite you. Did you ever consider Matrimony, Mr. Gower—you have been, I infer from the presence of your son, a married man? A son is not an unusual result—did you ever consider Matrimony in the light of the wine of Life?”

“I never did,” said Reuben rather shortly. He had little imagination.

“Then begin to consider it in that light. If you marry too young it is champagne; perhaps too sweet, but always full of fizz. The wine changes as you grow older. When you arrive at my time of life you are at the burgundy or the dry sherry stage. This is the dry sherry, in fact. You hold the generous vintage to your lips, and you drink it to the full enjoyment—”

Here, to his infinite consternation, the glass fell from his hand, and was shattered into twenty pieces on the floor.

“The slip,” he cried, turning pale. “The slip between the cup and the lip. I knew it.”

“Nonsense!” said Mrs. Sampson; “that was an accident. Take another glass.”

“No, no more; I have had enough. I must get back to the office to see if anything dreadful has happened.”

“Really,” said Mrs. Sampson, “you are too superstitious.”

Mr. Bodkin shook his hand and buttoned his coat sadly. As he was looking round for his hat, Charles, the footman, brought him a telegram. With pale cheeks and trembling hands he tore it open.

One moment, and the paper fell fluttering to the ground, while he stood stupefied, eyes and mouth wide open, speechless.

“What is it, man?” cried Reuben. “Are you struck silly?”

“Worse than that, Gower,” said Bodkin; “I am struck poor, I am ruined.”