

## An Old, Old Story.

by H. C. Bunner

I suppose the Tullingworth–Gordons were good Americans at heart; but the Tullingworth–Gordons were of English extraction, and, as somebody once said, the extraction had not been completely successful—a great deal of the English soil clung to the roots of the family tree.

They lived on Long Island, in a very English way, in a manor–house which was as English as they could make it, among surroundings quite respectably English for Americans of the third or fourth generation.

They had two English servants and some other American “help”; but they called the Americans by their last names, which anglified them to some extent. They had a servants’ hall, and a butler’s pantry, and a page in buttons, and they were unreasonably proud of the fact that one of their Tory ancestors had been obliged to leave New York for Halifax, in 1784, having only the alternative of a more tropical place of residence. I do not know whether they really held that the signers of the Declaration of Independence committed a grave error; but I do know that when they had occasion to speak of Queen Victoria, they always referred to her as “Her Majesty.”

“I see by the *Mail* to–night,” Mr. Tullingworth–Gordon would say to his wife, “that Her Majesty has presented the poor bricklayer who saved seventeen lives and lost both arms at the Chillingham–on–Frees disaster with an India shawl and a copy of the *Life of the Prince Consort*.”

“Her Majesty is always *so* generous!” Mrs. Tullingworth–Gordon would sigh; “and *so* considerate of the common people!”

Mr. Tullingworth–Gordon was a rich man, and he was free to indulge the fancy of his life, and to be as English as his name; and he engaged those two English servants to keep up the illusion.

It is the tale of the menials that I have to tell—the tale of the loves of Samuel Bilson, butler, and Sophronia Huckins, “which ’Uckins it ever was an’ so it were allays called, and which ’Uckins is good enough for

me, like it was good enough for my parents now departed, and there is 'ope for 'eaven for chapel-goers, though a Church-of-England woman I am myself.”

Sophronia Huckins was lady's maid to Mrs. Tullingworth-Gordon, housekeeper to Mr. and Mrs. Tullingworth-Gordon, and, in a way, autocrat and supreme ruler over the whole house of Tullingworth-Gordon. There were other servants, as I have said, but, in their several departments, Bilson and Sophronia were king and queen. Of course, at the first, there was some friction between these two potentates. For ten years they scratched and sparred and jostled; for ten years after that they lived in comfortable amity, relieving their feelings by establishing a reign of terror over the other servants; and then—ah, then—began the dawn of another day. Bilson was careless about the wine; Sophronia took to the wearing of gowns unbecoming a maid of forty years. It broke upon the Tullingworth-Gordon mind that something was in the wind, and that the conservative quiet of their domestic service was likely to be troubled.

Meanwhile, Nature, unconscious of the proprieties of the situation, was having her own way in the little passage back of the butler's pantry.

“You say”—the housekeeper spoke with a certain sternness—“as how you have loved me for ten long years. But I say as how it would 'ave been more to your credit, Samuel Bilson, to 'ave found it out afore this, when, if I do say it myself, there was more occasion.”

“It's none the wuss, Sophronia, for a-bein' found out now,” rejoined the butler, sturdily: “what you was, you is to me, an' I don't noways regret that you ain't what you was, in point of beauty, to 'ave young men an' sich a-comin' between us, as an engaged pair.”

““Oo's an engaged pair?” demanded Sophronia, with profound dignity.

“Us,” said Mr. Bilson, placidly: “or to be considered as sich.”

“I ain't considered us as sich,” said Sophronia, coquettishly: “not as yet.”

Mr. Bilson was stacking up dishes on the shelves in the passageway. He paused in his labors; put his hands on his hips, and faced his tormenting charmer with determination in his eye.

“Sophronia ’Uckins!” he said: “you’re forty, this day week; that much I know. Forty’s forty. You’ve kep’ your looks wonderful, an’ you ’ave your teeth which Providence give you. But forty’s forty. If you mean Bilson, you mean Bilson now, ’ere in this ’ere cupboard–extension, your ’and an’ your ’art, to love, honor, an’ obey, so ’elp you. Now, ’ow goes it?”

It went Mr. Bilson’s way. Sophronia demurred, and for a space of some few weeks she was doubtful; then she said “No”—but in the end she consented.

Why should she not? Bilson had been a saving man. No luxurious furniture beautified his little room over the stables. His character was above reproach. He allowed himself one glass of port each day from Mr. Tullingworth–Gordon’s stock; but there he drew the line. Such as it was, the master of the house had his own wine, every drop, except that solitary glass of port—save on one occasion.

And Sophronia Huckins was the occasion of that occasion. Smooth and decorous ran the course of true love for four months on end. Mrs. Tullingworth–Gordon had been made acquainted with the state of affairs; had raged, had cooled, and had got to that point where the natural woman arose within her, and she began to think about laying out a trousseau for the bride. Fair was the horizon; cloudless the sky. Then came the heavy blow of Fate.

When Cupid comes to you at forty years, he is likely to be something wrinkled, more or less fat and pousy, a trifle stiff in the joints. You must humor him a little; you must make believe, and play that he is young and fair. It takes imagination to do this, and in imagination Sophronia was deficient. Her betrothal was not two months old when she suddenly realized that there was something grotesque and absurd about it. How did she get the idea? Was it an echo of the gossip of the other servants? Did she see the shop–keepers, quick to catch all the local gossip, smiling at her as she went about the little town on her domestic errands? Was there something in Bilson’s manners that told her that he felt, in his inmost heart, that he had got to the point where

he had to take what he could get, and that he held her lucky to have been conveniently accessible at that critical juncture?

We can not know. Perhaps Bilson was to blame. A man may be in love—over head and ears in love—and yet the little red feather of his vanity will stick out of the depths, and proclaim that his self-conceit is not yet dead.

Perhaps it was Bilson: perhaps it was some other cause. It matters not. One dull November day, Sophronia Huckins told Samuel Bilson that she could not and would not marry him.

“It was my intent, Samuel; but I ’ave seen it was not the thing for neither of us. If you had ’a’ seen your way clear five or ten or may be fifteen years ago, I don’t say as it wouldn’t ’a’ been different. But as to sich a thing *now*, I may ’ave been foolish a-listenin’ to you last July; but what brains I ’ave is about me now, an’ I tell you plain, Samuel Bilson, it can’t never be.”

To Bilson this came like a clap of thunder out of the clearest and sunniest of skies. If the Cupid within him had grown old and awkward, he was unaware of it. To his dull and heavily British apprehension, it was the same Cupid that he had known in earlier years. The defection of his betrothed was a blow from which he could not recover.

“Them women,” he said, “is worse’n the measles. You don’t know when they’re comin’ out, an’ you don’t know when they’re goin’ in.”

The blow fell upon him late one evening, long after dinner; when everything had been put to rights. He was sitting in the butler’s pantry, sipping his one glass of port, when Sophronia entered and delivered her dictum.

She went out and left him—left him with the port. She left him with the sherry; she left him with the claret, with the old, old claret, with the comet year, with the wine that had rounded the Cape, with the Cognac, with the Chartreuse, with the syrupy Curaçoa and the Eau de Dantzie, and with the Scotch whiskey that Mr. Tullingworth-Gordon sometimes drank in despite of plain American Rye.

She left him with the structure of a lifetime shattered; with the love of twenty years nipped in its late-bourgeoning bud. She left him alone, and she left him with a deadly nepenthe at hand.

He fell upon those bottles, and, for once in his quiet, steady, conservative life, he drank his fill. He drank the soft, sub-acid claret; he drank the nutty sherry; he drank the yellow Chartreuse and the ruddy Curaçoa. He drank the fiery Cognac, and the smoky Scotch whiskey. He drank and drank, and as his grief rose higher and higher, high and more high he raised the intoxicating flood.

At two o'clock of that night, a respectable butler opened a side-door in the mansion of Mr. Tullingworth-Gordon, and sallied forth to cool his brow in the midnight air.

He was singing as they brought him back on a shutter, in the early morning; but it was not wholly with drunkenness, for delirium had hold of him. Down to the south of the house were long stretches of marsh, reaching into the Great South Bay, and there he had wandered in his first intoxication. There he had stepped over the edge of a little dyke that surrounded Mr. Tullingworth-Gordon's pike-pond—where all the pike died, because the water was too salt for them—and there they found him lying on his back, with one of the most interesting cases of compound fracture in his right leg that has yet been put on record, and with the flat stones that topped the dyke lying over him.

They took him to his room over the stable, and put him to bed, and sent for the doctor. The doctor came, and set the leg. He also smelt of Mr. Bilson's breath, and gazed upon Mr. Bilson's feverish countenance, and said:

“Hard drinker, eh? We'll have trouble with him, probably. Hasn't he got anybody to look after him?”

This query found its way up to the manor-house of the Tullingworth-Gordons. It came, in some way, to the ears of Sophronia. Shortly after dinner-time she appeared in the chamber of Bilson.

Bilson was “coming out of it.” He was conscious, he was sore; he was heavy of heart and head. He looked up, as he lay on his bed, and saw a comely, middle-aged Englishwoman, sharp of feature, yet somehow pleasant and comforting, standing by his bed.

“Sophronia!” he exclaimed.

“Hush!” she said; “the medical man said you wasn’t to talk.”

“Sophronia—’tain’t you!”

“P’r’aps it ain’t,” said Sophronia, sourly; “p’r’aps it’s a cow, or a ’orse or a goat, or anythin’ that is my neighbor’s. But the best I know, it’s me, an’ I’ve come to ’ave an eye on you.”

“Sophronia!” gasped the sufferer; “‘tain’t no ways proper.”

“T’s goin’ to be proper, Samuel Bilson. You wait, an’ you’ll see what you’ll see. ’Ere ’e comes.”

Mr. Bilson’s room was reached by a ladder, coming up through a hole in the floor. Through this hole came a peculiarly shaped felt hat; then a pale youthful face; then a vest with many buttons.

“To ’ave and to ’old,” said Sophronia. “‘Ere ’e is.”

The head came up, and a long, thin body after it. Pale and gaunt, swaying slightly backward and forward, like a stiff cornstalk in a mild breeze, the Reverend Mr. Chizzy stood before them and smiled vaguely.

The Reverend Mr. Chizzy was only twenty-four, and he might have passed for nineteen; but he was so high a churchman that the mould of several centuries was on him. He was a priest without a cure; but, as some of his irreverent friends expressed it, he was “in training” for the Rectorship of St. Bede’s the Less, a small church in the neighborhood, endowed by Mr. Tullingworth-Gordon and disapproved of by his Bishop, who had not yet appointed a clergyman. The Bishop had been heard to say that he had not yet made up his mind whether St. Bede’s the Less was a church or some new kind of theatre. Nevertheless, Mr. Chizzy was on hand, living under the wing of the Tullingworth-Gordons, and trying to make the good Church-of-England people of the parish believe that they needed him and his candles and his choir-boys.

Behind Mr. Chizzy came two limp little girls, hangers-on of the Tullingworth-Gordon household by grace of Mrs. Tullingworth-Gordon's charity. In New England they would have been called "chore-girls." The Tullingworth-Gordons called them "scullery maids."

Bilson half rose on his elbow in astonishment, alarm and indignation.

"Sophronia 'Uckins," he demanded, "what do this 'ere mean? I ain't a-dyin', and I ain't got no need of a clergyman, thank 'eaven. And no more this ain't a scullery, Mrs. 'Uckins."

"This," said Sophronia, pointing at the clergyman as though he were a wax-figure in a show, "this is to wed you and me, Samuel Bilson, and *them*" (she indicated the scullery maids,) "them witnesses it."

"Witnesses *wot*?" Mr. Bilson inquired, in a yell.

"Witnesses our marriage, Samuel Bilson. Nuss you I can not, both bein' single, and nussed you must and shall be. Now set up and be marri'd quiet."

Mr. Bilson's physical condition forbade him to leap from the bed; but his voice leaped to the rafters above him.

"Marri'd!" he shouted: "I'll die fust!"

"Die you will," said Sophronia, calmly but sternly, "if married you ain't, and that soon."

"Sophronia!" Bilson's voice was hollow and deeply reproachful; "you 'ave throwed me over."

"I 'ave," she assented.

"And 'ere I am."

"And there you are."

"Sophronia, you 'ave not treated me right."

“I ’ave not, Samuel Bilson,” Miss Huckins cheerfully assented; “I might ’ave known as you was not fit to take care of yourself. But I mean to do my dooty now, so will you ’ave the kindness to button your clo’es at the neck, and sit up?”

Mr. Bilson mechanically fastened the neck-band of his night-shirt and raised himself to the sitting posture.

“Mrs. Huckins,” Mr. Chizzy interrupted, in an uncertain way; “I didn’t understand—you did not tell me—there does not appear to have been the usual preliminary arrangement for this most sacred and solemn ceremony.”

Sophronia turned on him with scorn in her voice and bearing.

“Do I understand, sir, as you find yourself in a ’urry?”

“I am not in a hurry—oh, no. But—dear me, you know, I can’t perform the ceremony under these circumstances.”

Miss Huckins grew more profoundly scornful.

“Do you know any himpediment w’y we should not be lawfully joined together in matrimony?”

“Why,” said the perturbed cleric, “he doesn’t want you.”

“’E doesn’t know what ’e wants,” returned Sophronia, grimly; “if women waited for men to find out w’en they wanted wives, there’d be more old maids than there is. If you’ll be good enough to take your book in your ’and, sir, I’ll see to ’im.”

Bilson made one last faint protest.

“’Twouldn’t be right, Sophronia,” he wailed; “I ain’t wot I was; I’m a wuthless and a busted wreck. I can’t tie no woman to me for life. It ain’t doin’ justice to neither.”

“If you’re what you say you are,” said Sophronia, imperturbably, “and you know better than I do, you should be glad to take wot you can get. If I’m suited, don’t *you* complain.”



“Mrs. Huckins,” the young clergyman broke in, feebly asserting himself, “this is utterly irregular.”

“I know it is,” said Sophronia; “and we’re a–waitin’ for you to set it straight.”

The two chore–girls giggled. A warm flush mounted to Mr. Chizzy’s pale face. He hesitated a second; then nervously opened his book, and began the service. Sophronia stood by the bedside, clasping Bilson’s hand in a grasp which no writhing could loosen.

“Dearly beloved,” Mr. Chizzy began, addressing the two chore–girls; and with a trembling voice he hurried on to the important question:

“Wilt thou have this woman to be thy wedded wife?—“

“N—yah!”

Bilson had begun to say “No;” but Sophronia’s firm hand had tightened on his with so powerful a pressure that his negative remonstrance ended in a positive yell.

“Ah, *really*,” broke in Mr. Chizzy; “I can not proceed, M—M—Miss—ah, what’s your name?—I positively can’t!”

“*Mrs. Bilson*,” returned the unmoved Sophronia. “Are you intending for to part ’usband and wife at this point, sir? Excuse me; but we’re a–waitin’ of your convenience.”

Mr. Chizzy was a deep red in the face. His pallor had given place to a flush quite as ghastly in its way. The blood was waltzing in giddy circles through his brain as he read on and on.

No church—no candles—no robes—no choiring boys. Only this awful woman, stern as death, commanding him and Bilson. Why had he yielded to her? Why had he permitted himself to be dragged hither? Why was he meekly doing her bidding? Mr. Chizzy felt as though he were acting in some ghastly, nightmarish dream.

“*Then shall the Minister say: Who giveth this Woman to be married to this Man?*”

That roused Mr. Chizzy from his trance. It came late; but it seemed to open a way out of the horribly irregular business. He paused and tried to fix an uncertain eye on Sophronia.

“Have you a Father or a Friend here?” he demanded.

“Jim!” said Sophronia, loudly.

“Ma’am?” came a voice from the lower story of the stable.

“Say ‘I do.’”

“Ma’am?”

“Say ‘I do’—an’ say it directly!”

“Say—say?—what do you want, Miss Huckins?”

“*Jim!*” said Sophronia, sternly, “open your mouth an’ say ‘I do’ out loud, or I come down there immejit!”

“I do!” came from the floor below.

“‘Ere’s the ring,” said Sophronia, promptly; “‘I, M., take thee, N.’—if you’ll ’ave the kindness to go on, sir, we won’t detain you any longer than we can ’elp. I’m give away, I believe; an’ I’ll take ’im, M.”

“Forasmuch as,” began the Reverend Mr. Chizzy, a few minutes later, addressing the chore-girls, “Samuel and Sophronia have consented together in holy wedlock—“

He stopped suddenly. Up through the opening in the floor arose the head of a youthful negro, perhaps fourteen years of age. Mr. Chizzy recognized him as the stable-boy, a jockey of some local fame.

“What you want me to say I done do?” he inquired.

“Mrs.—Mrs.—Bilson!” said Mr. Chizzy, with a tremulous indignation in his voice; “did this negro infant act as your parent or friend, just now?”

“‘E give me away,” replied the unabashed bride.

Mr. Chizzy looked at her, at Bilson, at Jim, and at the chore-girls. Then he opened his book again and finished the ceremony.

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The Tullingworth-Gordons were angry when they heard of the marriage. They missed the two mainstays of their domestic system. But—well, Bilson was growing old, and Sophronia was growing tyrannical. Perhaps it was better as it was. And, after all, they had always wanted a Lodge, and a Lodge-keeper, and the old ice-house stood near the gate—a good two hundred feet from the house.

It was nearly a year before Bilson could walk around with comfort. Indeed, eighteen months later, he did not care to do more than sit in the sun and question Fate, while Mrs. Bilson tried to quiet a noisy baby within the Lodge.

“Ere I am laid up, as I should be,” said Bilson; “an there’s an active woman a-goin’ around with a baby, and a-nussin’ of him. If things was as they should be, in the course of nachur, we’d ’ave exchanged jobs, we would.”