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PING PONG COURTSHIP

The Rabbit family sat at breakfast. Josiah—a round-faced and portly little gentleman of forty-five—was expatiating on some original fancy strokes in the fancy game that held him in thrall. Miss Deborah, his maiden sister, prim and stately, was ministering, as usual, at the urn. Miss Daisy, his niece—not yet twenty and attractive—sat gazing with a bored air that ill became her laughing face, at the ceiling.

"Josiah," remarked Miss Deborah, caustically, "it's time that girl was married."

Miss Daisy smiled and tossed her pretty head.

"I'm in no hurry to leave my dear old aunty," she retorted gaily. Josiah frowned.

"No," continued the young lady unabashed. "I shouldn't be surprised, though, if dear aunty took it into her head to leave her brother and her disconsolate niece."

Miss Deborah gasped. "O! I know what I know," went on the tormentor, mercilessly. "Mr. Samuel Haddock doesn't come here to play ping-pong every evening for love of the game. What do you say, uncle?"

"Well," said Josiah, deliberately. "I've had my suspicions about Sam's game. There my dear girl, you needn't blush. I've known Sam this thirty-five year, since he and I were behind the counter together as improvers. There's many a worse fish in the sea than Haddock. You have my blessing."

"Josiah!" burst out his sister, with affected displeasure—when there came a knock on the door, and her further remarks were interrupted by the entrance of the maid with the morning's letters.

"Ah," said Josiah, "two for me—half a dozen for that giddy girl—and yes, one for you, Deb. From Sam, too. I could swear to his crabbed writing."

Miss Deborah seized the letter—her face lighting up with something like a pleased smile—and pocketed it for perusal in the sanctity of her own room.

Josiah and the girl noted her action with interest, whilst presumably occupied in digesting their respective epistles.

"Well, I'm blessed!" he blurted out suddenly. "If Sam hasn't written me for my consent to pay his addresses to you, Deb. That's what I call—No, don't go, my dear," he said, as Miss Deborah hurriedly rose, blushing like any school girl, and disappeared.

"Well, Sam's a good sort," he said reflectively, as he opened the other letter. "Plays a rattling good game too. I'm sure old Deb couldn't wish for a better—eh, what's this? Another of 'em! My stars, Daisy! do you know a fellow named Featherstonehaugh?"

"Yes, uncle," returned the girl, artlessly. "I know him very well. Aunty and I have met him frequently at ping-pong parties."

"Well, I'm fooled!" cried Josiah. "Just listen to this. The fellow says he wants to call and see me this evening 'to obtain my approval to pay court to my relative, Miss Rabbit, for whom he has long entertained feelings of regard.' Two of 'em in one morning!" he laughed. "Why, Deb's getting quite a flirt."

Daisy burst into a ripple of laughter. The idea of Bob Featherstonehaugh having any intentions toward her respected aunt was too ridiculous. She could have put a very different construction on his request, but she saw a farcical situation ahead and determined to play up to it.

"Aunty likes Bob, I know," she said, "and I think you'll like him, too. I should be careful with her, though. She is so sensitive, you know. Introduce the matter casually. You see, I hardly think she has made up her mind yet, and—understand, don't you?" The artful mixx smiled.

"Quite, my dear," said Josiah flattered. "A little tact, eh? I see. I don't mind confessing to you that I had thought Sam was the favored one; but upon my word, you never know women. Just run away and tell aunty I would like to see her."

The girl disappeared, and Josiah threw himself back in his chair, turning over in his mind how best to handle this delicate business. His sister entered. He noted her apparent confusion.

"You wanted me, Josiah, I believe?" she said.

"Well, yes, Deb. I'm in rather a—er—quandary. As far as these—er—honorable intentions are concerned, you know your happiness is my consideration. But you will see that I must have—er—an inkling as to your ideas. This Feather—fellow?"

"An estimable gentleman in every way, Josiah," the lady remarked. "Oh good family and income. I could wish nothing better."

"Ah, believe me, I'm glad," said Josiah, surprised. "Then I may take it you consent?"

"It has my entire approbation," returned the lady.

Josiah's disappointment was apparent in his face.

"I shall be glad to receive the gentleman," he said presently. "But, hang it all, what am I to tell Sam?"

Miss Deborah toyed with her glasses nervously.

"I hardly know, Josiah," she stammered. "I have been aware for some little time of Mr. Haddock's regard, and I may say, have permitted myself to think kindly of him."

Josiah looked his astonishment.

"Do I understand, my dear," he said, "that you cannot altogether make up your mind?"

"Yes, that is it. I like him—"

"And Mr. Feather—chappie?" queried Josiah.

"I like him, too," returned the lady, unhesitatingly.

Josiah gave a prolonged whistle. He noted her diffidence—her evident perturbation, and whilst unwilling to influence her decision, was still at a loss. Now was the time for the exercise of tact, he thought.

"I think I understand your dilemma," he said, after a pause. "Will you leave the matter in my hands? Tell the romp I'm waiting for my morning set. Grand game, ping-pong."

"Tell me, uncle," said the girl, when they were alone, which is it to be?"

"Can't make up her mind," returned Josiah, fussing about the table. "I must own myself at a loss. I want to give 'em both fair play, you understand, but hang me if I know what to do."

"Why not let them strive for her like the knights of old?" the girl suggested promptly. "They're both keen ping-pongers. Why not have a match, the winner to claim the faire lady?"

"By my life that is well thought of," responded the old sportsman, with alacrity. "A set, with a novel prize—the hand of the fair Miss Rabbit. It shall be done! Not a word to aunty. It's a glorious plan."

... (The text continues with the ping-pong match and the subsequent developments of the courtship.) ...

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the friendly adjuration and he braced himself to the effort. The result was a prolonged game of lightning shots and brilliant returns that eventually gave him the point. He mopped the perspiration from his brow and smiled at Josiah.

With an ingenious stroke, too quick to be caught by the eye, Bob succeeded in imparting a curving motion ball, a shot which completely baffled his opponent. He repeated this original shot three times. Sam was nonplussed. His ludicrous look of surprise caused Bob to smile.

"Three-five! Now, Sam, my lad," adjured Josiah, "remember the prize."

Sam remembered and gained the next point with all his old cleverness.

"Serve!" Ping! Pong! went the merry tune. Josiah's eyes bulged like those of a gaffed fish. "Now Sam!" With intent Sam pinned his opponent to the corner, and then with a low swift shot he drove across the table. "Five all!" yelled Josh. "Sam, I'm proud of you!"

The final game—the game upon which everything depended. Sam was breathing hard, his eyes fixed and his face set stern. His rival was smiling as if the result was already assured. Josiah was prancing on the hearth rug, as if in the grip of St. Vitus.

"Play!" Sam served. Away sped the ball on its mad dance. One minute—two—three—and the game stood forty—thirty! Another thirty seconds, and Josh called "Deuce!" Five minutes—and Bob Featherstonehaugh coolly laid down his racquet and Sam was vanquished!

"Josh," he said gloomily, "would you mind telling me who I've been playing?"

"Oh, I had the good fortune to win the county championship last Thursday week," remarked the visitor, modestly.

"Sir," returned Sam, putting on his coat. "I am pleased to have met you. Though beaten, I hope I know how to accept defeat."

"Good old Sam!" cried Josh. "That's the true Briton's spirit. And now, with your permission I will call the ladies."

Miss Deborah, with heightened color, and the young lady, perfectly self possessed entered the room. Josiah cleared his throat and, rubbing his hands together, remarked—

"Deb, my dear, Mr. Featherstonehaugh—is it has done me the honor to confess his feeling toward you. My dear, you will allow me to be the first to congratulate you upon the regard of a very estimable gentleman."

"I too," said Sam, stepping forward. "I would like to add my felicitations."

"Mr. Featherstonehaugh!" gasped the lady, staring from one to the other. "I don't understand!"

That gentleman's face evinced amazement for a few seconds and then he caught a roguish look in the eye of Miss Daisy and went into a burst of uncontrollable laughter. Josiah looked astounded at his explosion of mirth. Sam muttered something about "abominable bad form."

"My dear sir," said Josiah, "there is something here that goes beyond us. Pray let us share the joke."

Bob's face suddenly straightened.

"Pardon," he said, his eyes glistening with the merry tears, "but really we seem to be working at cross purposes. This lady—Miss Rabbit—is the lady to whom I have been referring in our—little conversation."

"Well, bless my soul!" exclaimed Sam, dropping his glass. "Josh, you old muddle, what game do you think you've been playing with us?"

"Daisy!" Josiah gasped, and gazed round the room as if seeking a way of escape. The girl's merry laugh brought the smile back to his face. "You little rogue!" he cried. "How nicely you tricked your trusting aunt and your credulous old uncle! Sam, you must blame it all on her. I've a good mind to—but there, never mind. It was a good game, and the prize was fairly won. Sam—my sister. Bob—my niece—Let us go in to supper!"

... (The text continues with the family dinner and the end of the courtship.) ...

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