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THE MAL-A-PROPOS PARENT

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Young Mr. Pippitt had a father somewhere in America. Every one who knew young Mr. Pippitt knew that; for he had often spoken of his father, of the fortune he was making, and of the liberal presents he sent home. Then came a time when young Mr. Pippitt said less about his father and less about the presents. Thus it was that people had almost forgotten the existence of old Mr. Pippitt, when it was recalled to their memories in a very startling and tragical way. Old Mr. Pippitt had landed in England and was on his way to London, when he was killed in a great railway disaster. His name, discovered from a letter in his pocket, was published; and young Mr. Pippitt flew to the scene. The body was not mangled or disfigured, and after one moment of extreme agitation the bereaved son informed the official who had led him to where the dead man lay that it was indeed his father. His evidence before the coroner put the matter beyond doubt. Mr. Pippitt buried his father, assumed deep mourning, and wrote to the company's solicitors. Repugnant as it was to him to appear to make money out of the unhappy occurrence, the loss of a rich and liberal parent was a matter which no struggling young man could, in justice to himself, submit to without compensation.

Railway companies having an extensive experience of humanity, are prone to scepticism; and very many inquiries were made as to the life, doings, profession, and profits of old Mr. Pippitt, and especially as to his alleged remittances to his son. That gentleman stood the fire of questions very successfully, he had letters from his father up to within six months of the accident, and he proved the receipt of very considerable yearly sums, in each of the four years during which his father had been absent. In face of this evidence, the matter in issue reduced itself to a difference of opinion between the company and young Mr. Pippitt: first, as to the probability of old Mr. Pippitt continuing to make money; secondly, as to the probability of his continuing to share what he made with his son. More concretely still, the company, without prejudice, offered two thousand pounds, and Mr. Pippitt, without prejudice, asked seven thousand, whereupon the case was entered for trial.

Mr. Naylor, the company's counsel, declared that young Mr. Pippitt was one of the best witnesses he had ever seen. His demeanor was excellent, his facts irrefragable, his memory neither unnaturally bad nor suspiciously good. The last letter he produced from his father enclosed a draft for three hundred pounds, and announced the writer's return on a business visit by the next mail but one. By

that mail, a gentleman of the name of Pippitt had crossed the ocean and had, presumably taken the train on landing, and met his death in the accident. Mr. Naylor felt his case was so bad that he almost charged young Mr. Pippitt with direct perjury, and twisted up a note to Mr. Budge, who was on the other side, offering four thousand pounds and costs. Mr. Budge, answered that he must consult his client, and that he would wait till the end of the plaintiff's evidence. Mr. Naylor nodded, and redoubled his insinuations of an unscrupulous conspiracy.

Mr. Budge rose to re-examine with a smile on his face. Mr. Pippitt said he had no reason to anticipate a falling-off in his father's business; it was well established; nor in his father's liberality; his father had always led him to suppose that he would provide for him. Yes, there was a strong—yes, a very strong affection between them. Here Mr. Pippitt's voice faltered; the judge nodded sympathetically; and the foreman of the jury wrote "5,000 pounds?" on a slip of paper and passed it round the box.

That artistic falter produced another effect also. The gangways of the court were crowded with the usual throng of idle folk, assembled to hear Mr. Naylor's cross-examination; and as the plaintiff bore witness to the bonds of love which bound him to his father there came from the recesses of the crowd a voice which said:

"That there is! Let me through! Who's saying my boy doesn't love his old father?"

The group of people parted; and an elderly man came to the front, advancing in an uncertain apologetic manner.

"Silence! silence!" cried the usher, a world of pained indignation in his accents.

"You mustn't disturb the court, sir!" thundered the judge.

"I came to speak a word for Joe. I was passing, and dropped in, and, seeing Joe, I made bold to speak. He's been a good son, has Joe."

The judge looked appealingly at counsel.

"Who is Joe, and who is this person?" And getting no answer, he turned to the plaintiff. Young Mr. Pippitt met his eye with an uneasy smile.

"I haven't the least idea, my lord," he said.

The judge looked at the write.

"Your name is Joseph?" he asked.

"No, it—yes—that is, certainly, my lord."

"You don't seem very sure, sir," remarked the judge, and he added, addressing the intruder,

"Who are you, sir?"

The old man seemed in a nervous and broken-down condition; but he stammered out, "He's my son, my son, my lord."

"It's a lie," cried young Mr. Pippitt.

"Hold your tongue till you're asked to speak," said the lordship snappishly. "I want to hear what this man has to say."

The old man had much to say: much of young Mr. Pippitt's virtue, industry, and affection; and much of his own fortunes, misfortunes, and wrongs. He usurped the functions of both lawyer and witness, and all the court listened to him.

"I'm glad to be here, gentlemen," he said—"glad to be here. I thought I was never going to get out of that cell they put me in, not for long years. But here I am, Joe, thank God!"

"Who put you in a cell?" asked the judge.

"I'm telling you as fast as I can," answered the old man petulantly. "I'd just written to Joe to send him a bit money and tell him to look out for me, when they brought a charge of fraud against me—against me, a respectable merchant. And I was tried: tried and found guilty—unjustly, my lord—and sentenced to five years. To think of it! They didn't know me out in Louisiana; no east-coast jury would have convicted."

"Why didn't they know you?"

"I wasn't going to have my name known. I called myself Brown; and they convicted me—as I wrote to you Joe—for five years. But the Governor did his duty. He was a white man, the Governor. He let me out."

"Why?" asked the judge curiously.

"Was a white man to get five years for besting nigger?" demanded the old man, with his first approach to vigor. "Not if the Governor knew it! Oh, he was a white man. So here I am, Joe—here I am, thank God!"

The judge leaned forward and asked: "Have you any letters from that man you say is your son?"

The old man pulled a dirty letter out of his pocket, and handed it up with a bewildered look.

Young Mr. Pippitt still looked on with his fixed smile, while the judge read:

"Dear Father,

"It's a bad job that you're nabbed. Five years is no joke. Why were you such a fool? You were right about the name. Keep it quite dark, for God's sake! I'll see what I can do.

"Yours,
"J. P.

"Received your last all right."

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