

**WILLIAM
WYMARK
JACOBS**

A MIXED PROPOSAL

William Wymark Jacobs
A Mixed Proposal

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A MIXED PROPOSAL

Major Brill, late of the Fenshire Volunteers, stood in front of the small piece of glass in the hatstand, and with a firm and experienced hand gave his new silk hat a slight tilt over the right eye. Then he took his cane and a new pair of gloves, and with a military but squeaky tread, passed out into the road. It was a glorious day in early autumn, and the soft English landscape was looking its best, but despite the fact that there was nothing more alarming in sight than a few cows on the hillside a mile away, the Major paused at his gate, and his face took on an appearance of the greatest courage and resolution before proceeding. The road was dusty and quiet, except for the children playing at cottage doors, and so hot that the Major, heedless of the fact that he could not replace the hat at exactly the same angle, stood in the shade of a tree while he removed it and mopped his heated brow.

He proceeded on his way more leisurely, overtaking, despite

his lack of speed, another man who was walking still more slowly in the shade of the hedge.

"Fine day, Halibut," he said, briskly; "fine day."

"Beautiful," said the other, making no attempt to keep pace with him.

"Country wants rain, though," cried the Major over his shoulder.

Halibut assented, and walking slowly on, wondered vaguely what gaudy color it was that had attracted his eye. It dawned on him at length that it must be the Major's tie, and he suddenly quickened his pace, by no means reassured as the man of war also quickened his.

"Halloa, Brill!" he cried. "Half a moment."

The Major stopped and waited for his friend; Halibut eyed the tie uneasily—it was fearfully and wonderfully made—but said nothing.

"Well?" said the Major, somewhat sharply.

"Oh—I was going to ask you, Brill—Confound it! I've forgotten what I was going to say now. I daresay I shall soon think of it. You're not in a hurry?"

"Well, I am, rather," said Brill. "Fact is— Is my hat on straight, Halibut?"

The other assuring him that it was, the Major paused in his career, and gripping the brim with both hands, deliberately tilted it over the right eye again.

"You were saying—" said Halibut, regarding this manoeuvre

with secret disapproval.

"Yes," murmured the Major, "I was saying. Well, I don't mind telling an old friend like you, Halibut, though it is a profound secret. Makes me rather particular about my dress just now. Women notice these things. I'm—sha'nt get much sympathy from a confirmed old bachelor like you—but I'm on my way to put a very momentous question."

"The devil you are!" said the other, blankly.

"Sir!" said the astonished Major.

"Not Mrs. Riddel?" said Halibut.

"Certainly, sir," said the Major, stiffly. "Why not?"

"Only that I am going on the same errand," said the confirmed bachelor, with desperate calmness.

The Major looked at him, and for the first time noticed an unusual neatness and dressiness in his friend's attire. His collar was higher than usual; his tie, of the whitest and finest silk, bore a pin he never remembered to have seen before; and for the first time since he had known him, the Major, with a strange sinking at the heart, saw that he wore spats.

"This is extraordinary," he said, briefly. "Well, good-day, Halibut. Can't stop."

"Good-day," said the other.

The Major quickened his pace and shot ahead, and keeping in the shade of the hedge, ground his teeth as the civilian on the other side of the road slowly, but surely, gained on him.

It became exciting. The Major was handicapped by his upright

bearing and short military stride; the other, a simple child of the city, bent forward, swinging his arms and taking immense strides. At a by-lane they picked up three small boys, who, trotting in their rear, made it evident by their remarks that they considered themselves the privileged spectators of a foot-race. The Major could stand it no longer, and with a cut of his cane at the foremost boy, softly called a halt.

"Well," said Halibut, stopping.

The man's manner was suspicious, not to say offensive, and the other had much ado to speak him fair.

"This is ridiculous," he said, trying to smile. "We can't walk in and propose in a duet. One of us must go to-day and the other to-morrow."

"Certainly," said Halibut; "that'll be the best plan."

"So childish," said the Major, with a careless laugh, "two fellows walking in hot and tired and proposing to her."

"Absurd," replied Halibut, and both men eyed each other carefully.

"So, if I'm unsuccessful, old chap," said the Major, in a voice which he strove to render natural and easy, "I will come straight back to your place and let you know, so as not to keep you in suspense."

"You're very good," said Halibut, with some emotion; "but I think I'll take to-day, because I have every reason to believe that I have got one of my bilious attacks coming on to-morrow."

"Pooh! fancy, my dear fellow," said the Major, heartily; "I

never saw you look better in my life."

"That's one of the chief signs," replied Halibut, shaking his head. "I'm afraid I must go to-day."

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