

## MR. FLINTSHIRE'S MARRIAGE

Mr. Flintshire retired from the Indian civil service at the age of 50, and returned to England with the fixed intention of marrying for money. Being a bachelor, his pension was more than sufficient for his wants, and his savings amounted to a considerable fortune. But he was a very careful man, to say the least, and he had always cherished the idea of finding a rich wife who would keep him. Hitherto he had been unsuccessful, because he had, to a limited extent, allowed sentiment to interfere with his choice. But now that his income had diminished in consequence of his retirement, he resolved to be guided entirely by expediency, and to permit neither age nor any other disqualification to balk his design.

It is hardly surprising that with such broad views as this he had comparatively little difficulty in discovering his opportunity. He was chatting one day with his doctor in rather a despondent mood, in consequence of the unsatisfactory state of his liver, when the medical gentleman, to cheer him, remarked:

"My dear sir, you need not feel uneasy. You will be well in a month, and you will live to be as brisk and lively at 84 as old Mrs. Mumblewood."

"Who is Mrs. Mumblewood?" inquired Mr. Flintshire.

"A patient of mine—a wonderful old lady. As I tell you, she is 84, and yet comes to see me in an omnibus to save a cab fare," said the doctor, laughing. "You will hardly believe it when I tell you she is enormously wealthy."

"Is she a widow?" inquired Mr. Flintshire, pricking up his ears.

"Yes. Her husband was old Mumblewood, the contractor, who died worth, as they say, a quarter of a million. The old fellow came from nothing, but the widow is a shrewd, clever old lady, as brisk as you or I."

"She can't last much longer, I suppose?" remarked Mr. Flintshire, absently.

"Well, that is a professional secret," said the doctor, laughing again. "However, it is safe to predict that she has lived the best part of her life."

"I should like to see her," said Mr. Flintshire, in quite a hearty tone for him. "The sight of her will do one more good than a course of medicine."

"It will be cheaper, at any rate," said the doctor, with unconscious irony. "Let me see—I should like to have a look at you next week. Now, Tuesday morning at 12 o'clock is old Mrs. Mumblewood's hour, and you might arrange your visit accordingly."

Probably the doctor had no other designs in his mind than the wish to secure another fee, and in this he succeeded, for Mr. Flintshire at once undertook to call on the day and at the hour mentioned.

It seems incredible that any man should seriously think of paying court to an old lady of 84. Yet Mr. Flintshire was quite prepared to do so if it turned out that Mrs. Mumblewood was anything like as rich as was supposed, and he made the appointment with the most deliberate intentions.

He had no difficulty in learning all about the old lady, who resided in Sloan street, and was well known in the neighborhood. The result of his inquiries was highly satisfactory, for though the deceased contractor had not left anything like a quarter of a million, the widow had inherited a large fortune, which must have considerably increased in consequence of her penurious habits. She lived in a small house, attended only by two old servants who had been respectively cook and butler to her late husband. She could hardly be spending £500 a year, to judge from the stories that were told about her, and the natural inference was that her saving must alone amount to a fortune.

Under these circumstances Mr. Flintshire did not fail to keep his appointment. He considered the widow an excellent chance, and though her miserly propensities rather interfered with his original design of being supported free of expense, this drawback was counterbalanced by the probability of her speedy demise. Even if he should have to keep her for a few years, her fortune, which would come to him, would only be proportionately increased. He therefore quite made up his mind to marry her, nor did his purpose waver when he found Mrs. Mumblewood an illiterate old lady, with a skin like parchment, a face that might have been carved from a block of wood, and a

tongue that was constantly saying bitter things.

The meeting at the doctor's house, which was their first introduction, soon ripened into intimacy. Mr. Flintshire "made the running"—to use a sporting phrase—with dexterity and determination. He insisted on giving the widow a lift home in a cab, and from that day forward he never failed to send her some little token of regard. Singular as it may appear in an old lady of 84, Mrs. Mumblewood was evidently flattered by these attentions, and, though she soon intimated to him she suspected he had designs on her fortune, she readily accepted his assurance that his politeness arose from pure friendship. Before long Mr. Flintshire got into the habit of calling nearly every day, and though the hospitality he received was of a very meagre kind, he could not help admiring the strict economy which the widow practiced in her domestic arrangements.

It was only natural, however, that the old proverb about the course of true love never running smooth should have been exemplified in Mr. Flintshire's case. If the widow received his attentions with complacent satisfaction, he was much less favorably regarded by another member of the household. He perceived that he had an enemy in the butler from the first moment that ancient retainer opened the door to him. This individual was a surly, not over-clean old man of 60 or thereabouts, whose chief duties appeared to be to keep off intruders from his mistress, since he apparently discharged no other functions. It was perfectly obvious that old Numb was jealous of everyone who entered the house, and, probably, had an eye to his mistress's fortune. He was never polite to Mr. Flintshire, though the latter, from motives of policy, took great pains to make himself agreeable, even going to the length of an occasional gratuity. Unfortunately the man appeared to have considerable influence with the old lady, who was evidently a little afraid of him. Mr. Flintshire, who did not intend to be refused when he made his proposal of marriage, realized that he must not leave Mr. Numb out of his calculations. The consequence was that, after mature deliberation, he one day asked the butler to give him a few words in private, and thus delivered himself:

"Mr. Numb," he said, mysteriously, "has the possibility of your mistress marrying again ever occurred to you?"

"No, it hasn't," said the man, shortly.

"Well, Mr. Numb, perhaps not, though you could hardly have imagined that I could see so much of that excellent lady as I have done lately without conceiving a very great regard for her. Now, supposing," said Mr. Flintshire, quite jocosely, "supposing I were to aspire to gain your mistress's hand, what would you say?"

"I should say, don't you wish you may get it?" returned Numb, calmly.

"I am quite serious," said Mr. Flintshire, frowning a little. "Of course, I know it is not usual for a gentleman to consult a lady's butler before proposing marriage to her. Indeed, the idea is ridiculous. But you have lived in your mistress's service so long that she regards you as a friend and adviser, and, under the circumstances, I think it only right to mention the matter to you. A word from you, Mr. Numb, might prove very useful."

"Very likely," said Mr. Numb, in an oracular tone.

"Well, now, come, Mr. Numb. Just consider. I am not a foolish and extravagant man who would play ducks and drakes with your mistress's money. On the contrary, I am a careful man, and not a poor one either. I think we should live a little better, Numb, if I were master here; your wages might be raised; and—and—well, Numb, on my wedding day, I dare say I might give you a five-pound note. What do you say to that?"

Mr. Flintshire spoke in his most earnest and persuasive tone, but failed to move a muscle of Mr. Numb's stolid face.

"Or—or ten. Shall we say ten, Numb?" said Mr. Flintshire, eagerly.

"Make it fifty," said the butler, with a perfectly impassive countenance.

"Fifty! Bless my soul. Ahem! It's a very large sum," gasped Mr. Flintshire. "Can't we split the difference and meet half-way. Say twenty or twenty-five."

"Fifty," repeated Numb, stubbornly.

"Well, well, fifty, then," said Mr. Flintshire, with resignation. "It's a large sum, but—". However, say fifty."

The butler said fifty, apparently rather

to oblige Mr. Flintshire than from any interest he felt in the discussion—judging, at least, from his tone and manner. Nothing more passed at this remarkable interview, but the next day Mr. Flintshire proposed to Mrs. Mumblewood and was immediately accepted.

After this matters went smoothly enough, and though Mr. Flintshire fretted a good deal about the £50 he had promised to Numb, he did not consider the money thrown away. The alacrity with which Mrs. Mumblewood had accepted him plainly revealed that he owed his success to the butler's interference. When once he was married he flattered himself that Mr. Numb's dominion would soon come to an end. Meanwhile, it was prudent to be polite to him, for since he acted as the old lady's confidential adviser, he might make himself disagreeable by suggesting settlements and other undesirable complications. Mr. Flintshire had previously discovered that the butler was a remarkably shrewd man of business, and had served in his youth as a clerk in a lawyer's office.

Nothing of the kind occurred, however, and the marriage was performed in a neighboring church without fuss or ceremony. Mr. Numb received his £50, together with a promise of a rise in wages, which Mr. Flintshire intended, in his own mind, as a preliminary to dismissing him. The wedding banquet and the auspicious event in no way disturbed the even tenor of the household. The only change that occurred was that from henceforth Mr. Flintshire was promoted to the dignity of paymaster of the establishment, the widow stopping all supplies with promptitude the moment she had changed her name.

Mr. Flintshire did not trouble to announce his wedding in the papers. There was nothing to be gained by doing so, and his wife did not appear to desire it. He settled down readily enough to his new state of life, and devoted himself to ministering to his wife's comfort in a very laudable manner. The chief aim he had in view was to prevent her from making a will. He strongly suspected that she had made one before her marriage, in which the name of Mr. Numb figured conspicuously; but that document was now null and void by operation of law. If his wife, therefore, did not make a fresh one he would, at her death, inherit everything as her husband, and he was, accordingly, quite content to leave matters where they were at present.

If Mr. Flintshire deserved domestic happiness as a reward for his perseverance, he certainly did not attain that desirable consummation. To begin with, his wife was crochety and fractious, as old people generally are, but, in addition to these failings, she possessed a remarkably vigorous temper. Mr. Flintshire, to serve his own purposes, staid by her side from morning till night, and she made a perfect slave of him. Being morbidly fearful of offending her, he dared not venture to retaliate, and never was an unhappy husband more henpecked than he. Another source of annoyance was that the whole household seemed to be in league to plunder him. The simple domestic arrangements which had sufficed when the old lady held the purse were no longer sufficient. His wife was the first to propose a more liberal table, and Mr. Numb manifested a perfectly fiendish ingenuity in suggesting costly little dishes for her. In a word, the housekeeping expenses increased to an enormous extent, and all attempts at introducing economy proved unavailing.

The last, but not the least, of the bridegroom's troubles was the presence in the house of Numb, the butler. So long as this man remained, Mr. Flintshire felt that he was only the nominal head of the establishment. Mr. Numb did precisely as he pleased, and his influence with his mistress showed no signs of diminishing. Yet Mr. Flintshire did not see his way to getting rid of him. If he attempted to exercise his authority his wife might be driven to take some desperate course. He ventured on one occasion to hint that Numb's services might with advantage be dispensed with, but the suggestion called forth such a torrent of reproaches and invectives that Mr. Flintshire trembled at his temerity. Numb staid on and haunted him like a veritable Old Man of the Sea, drawing high wages, increasing the weekly bills, and what was far worse, enjoying the larger share of his wife's confidence.

The one bright spot in the midst of Mr. Flintshire's tribulation was that his wife evinced no desire to make a will. He therefore felt tolerably secure about the future

which was a great consolation to him. Nevertheless, a year of this anxious life so undermined his constitution that, in all probability, another twelvemonth would have either killed him or rendered him hopelessly imbecile. Fortunately for him, these dreadful contingencies were averted by the sudden death of the old lady, who expired in her sleep without having given the slightest indication of her approaching end.

The sad event had much the same effect upon the bereaved husband as a summer shower has upon a parched garden. It revived him instantly and called forth all his former energy and vitality. His first step was to make a minute and careful examination of the deceased lady's effects, without, as he had anticipated, finding a trace of a will. The precaution was hardly necessary, for he was certain she had not made one, but the search satisfied his mind, and he lost no time in venting his revengful feelings against Mr. Numb. He nursed his resentment until the day of the funeral, but immediately upon his return from following his wife to the grave he summoned the butler to his presence. The man shuffled into the room with a hang-dog look, as though he anticipated his fate, but Mr. Flintshire remarked that his expression was insolent and defiant.

"Numb," said his master, sharply; "you will be good enough to leave this house within an hour. I won't stand any more of your insolence, and it was only out of consideration for the poor lady who has gone that I have borne with you so long. I will pay you a month's wages, and I warn you not to attempt to make off with any of my property."

"Two can play at that game," snarled the butler, fumbling in his pocket, and producing a document. "Suppose this house and everything in it was my property, and I was to ask you to clear out; what would you say then?"

"It is a perfectly idle proposition," said Mr. Flintshire, loftily. "What is that paper?"

"It is a copy of the old lady's will. My lawyer has the original."

"Is it dated since my marriage?" inquired Mr. Flintshire, with a shade of anxiety.

"Oh, no!—long before," answered the butler, with a grin.

"Then, it is not worth the paper it is written on," said Mr. Flintshire, waving aside the document. "I don't want to see it. It is of no consequence whatever."

"I shouldn't be too sure if I was you," returned Numb, maliciously, as he put the paper back in his pocket. "I fancy you will laugh the other side of your mouth before the day is out."

"Get out of my sight this instant!" cried Mr. Flintshire, losing his temper. "If you have not left the house within an hour I shall send for the police."

The butler appeared quite unmoved by this threat, and disappeared with perfect self-possession. His confident air troubled Mr. Flintshire a little, though he hardly knew why. It was obvious that the man did not believe that the will he spoke of was void, but that was only his ignorance. Nevertheless, Mr. Flintshire resolved to call immediately upon the firm of solicitors who had been in the habit of acting as his wife's legal advisers, and accordingly he hailed a passing hansom, and drove to Lincoln's inn.

"Are you Mr. Flintshire?" inquired the senior member of the firm in question, upon his new client being ushered in, "the gentleman who recently married our late client, Mrs.—Mrs. Mumblewood?"

"Yes," answered Mr. Flintshire, struck with uneasiness at something strange in the lawyer's tone and manner. "Possibly you were unaware of our marriage."

"I never heard of it till to-day. I regret to say I have to make a most extraordinary and painful communication to you," said the lawyer, speaking as though he could hardly realize what he was about to say. "I have had Mr. Numb here this morning, and it was from him I heard of your—your marriage."

"Good heavens, what is the matter?" gasped Mr. Flintshire, beside himself with nervous apprehension.

"I really hardly like to break the news to you, but the fact is our late client was secretly married to this Mr. Numb some years ago. I had no idea of it till this morning. It is the most extraordinary state of things I ever heard of in my life," said the lawyer, leaning back in his chair.

"It's a lie—a base, infamous conspiracy!" cried Mr. Flintshire, foaming at the mouth.