

## THE HOTEL EXPERIENCE OF MR. PINK FLUKER

BY RICHARD MALCOLM JOHNSTON (1822-1898)

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### I

Mr. Peterson Fluker, generally called Pink, for his fondness for as stylish dressing as he could afford, was one of that sort of men who habitually seem busy and efficient when they are not. He had the bustling activity often noticeable in men of his size, and in one way and another had made up, as he believed, for being so much smaller than most of his adult acquaintance of the male sex. Prominent among his achievements on that line was getting married to a woman who, among other excellent gifts, had that of being twice as big as her husband.

"Fool who?" on the day after his marriage he had asked, with a look at those who had often said that he was too little to have a wife.

They had a little property to begin with, a couple of hundreds of acres, and two or three negroes apiece. Yet, except in the natural increase of the latter, the accretions of worldly estate had been inconsiderable till now, when their oldest child, Marann, was some fifteen years old. These accretions had been saved and taken care of by Mrs. Fluker, who was as staid and silent as he was mobile and voluble.

Mr. Fluker often said that it puzzled him how it was that he made smaller crops than most of his neighbors, when, if not always convincing, he could generally put every one of them to silence in discussions upon agricultural topics. This puzzle had led him to not

unfrequent ruminations in his mind as to whether or not his vocation might lie in something higher than the mere tilling of the ground. These ruminations had lately taken a definite direction, and it was after several conversations which he had held with his friend Matt Pike.

Mr. Matt Pike was a bachelor of some thirty summers, a foretime clerk consecutively in each of the two stores of the village, but latterly a trader on a limited scale in horses, wagons, cows, and similar objects of commerce, and at all times a politician. His hopes of holding office had been continually disappointed until Mr. John Sanks became sheriff, and rewarded with a deputyship some important special service rendered by him in the late very close canvass. Now was a chance to rise, Mr. Pike thought. All he wanted, he had often said, was a start. Politics, I would remark, however, had been regarded by Mr. Pike as a means rather than an end. It is doubtful if he hoped to become governor of the state, at least before an advanced period in his career. His main object now was to get money, and he believed that official position would promote him in the line of his ambition faster than was possible to any private station, by leading him into more extensive acquaintance with mankind, their needs, their desires, and their caprices. A deputy sheriff, provided that lawyers were not too indulgent in allowing acknowledgment of service of court processes, in postponing levies and sales, and in settlement of litigated cases, might pick up three hundred dollars, a good sum for those times, a fact which Mr. Pike had known and pondered long.

It happened just about then that the arrears of rent for the village hotel had so accumulated on Mr. Spouter, the last occupant, that the owner, an indulgent man, finally had said, what he had been expected for years and years to say, that he could not wait on Mr. Spouter forever and eternally. It was at this very nick, so to speak, that Mr. Pike made to Mr. Fluker the suggestion to quit a business so far beneath his powers, sell out, or rent out, or tenant out, or do something else with

his farm, march into town, plant himself upon the ruins of Jacob Spouter, and begin his upward soar.

Now Mr. Fluker had many and many a time acknowledged that he had ambition; so one night he said to his wife:

"You see how it is here, Nervy. Farmin' somehow don't suit my talons. I need to be flung more 'mong people to fetch out what's in me. Then thar's Marann, which is gittin' to be nigh on to a growd-up woman; an' the child need the s'iety which you 'bleeged to acknowledge is sca'ce about here, six mile from town. Your brer Sam can stay here an' raise butter, chickens, eggs, pigs, an'--an'--an' so forth. Matt Pike say he jes' know they's money in it, an' special with a housekeeper keerful an' equinomical like you."

It is always curious the extent of influence that some men have upon wives who are their superiors. Mrs. Fluker, in spite of accidents, had ever set upon her husband a value that was not recognized outside of his family. In this respect there seems a surprising compensation in human life. But this remark I make only in passing. Mrs. Fluker, admitting in her heart that farming was not her husband's forte, hoped, like a true wife, that it might be found in the new field to which he aspired. Besides, she did not forget that her brother Sam had said to her several times privately that if his brer Pink wouldn't have so many notions and would let him alone in his management, they would all do better. She reflected for a day or two, and then said:

"Maybe it's best, Mr. Fluker. I'm willin' to try it for a year, anyhow. We can't lose much by that. As for Matt Pike, I hain't the confidence in him you has. Still, he bein' a boarder and deputy sheriff, he might accidentally do us some good. I'll try it for a year providin' you'll fetch me the money as it's paid in, for you know I know how to manage that better'n you do, and you know I'll try to manage it and all the rest of the business for the best."

To this provision Mr. Fluker gave consent, qualified by the claim that he was to retain a small margin for indispensable personal exigencies. For he contended, perhaps with justice, that no man in the responsible position he was about to take ought to be expected to go about, or sit about, or even lounge about, without even a continental red in his pocket.

The new house--I say *new* because tongue could not tell the amount of scouring, scalding, and whitewashing that that excellent housekeeper had done before a single stick of her furniture went into it--the new house, I repeat, opened with six eating boarders at ten dollars a month apiece, and two eating and sleeping at eleven, besides Mr. Pike, who made a special contract. Transient custom was hoped to hold its own, and that of the county people under the deputy's patronage and influence to be considerably enlarged.

In words and other encouragement Mr. Pike was pronounced. He could commend honestly, and he did so cordially.

"The thing to do, Pink, is to have your prices reg'lar, and make people pay up reg'lar. Ten dollars for eatin', jes' so; eleb'n for eatin' *an'* sleepin'; half a dollar for dinner, jes' so; quarter apiece for breakfast, supper, and bed, is what I call reason'ble bo'd. As for me, I sca'cely know how to rig'late, because, you know, I'm a' officer now, an' in course I natchel *has* to be away sometimes an' on expenses at 'tother places, an' it seem like some 'lowance ought by good rights to be made for that; don't you think so?"

"Why, matter o' course, Matt; what you think? I ain't so powerful good at figgers. Nervy is. S'posen you speak to her 'bout it."

"Oh, that's perfec' unuseless, Pink. I'm a' officer o' the law, Pink, an' the law consider women--well, I may say the law, *she* deal 'ith *men*, not women, an' she expect her officers to understan' figgers, an' if I hadn't o' understood figgers Mr. Sanks wouldn't or darsnt' to 'p'int me

his dep'ty. Me 'n' you can fix them terms. Now see here, reg'lar bo'd--eatin' bo'd, I mean--is ten dollars, an' sleepin' and singuil meals is 'cordin' to the figgers you've sot for 'em. Ain't that so? Jes' so. Now, Pink, you an' me'll keep a runnin' account, you a-chargin' for reg'lar bo'd, an' I a'lowin' to myself credics for my absentees, accordin' to transion customers an' singuil mealers an' sleepers. Is that fa'r, er is it not fa'r?"

Mr. Fluker turned his head, and after making or thinking he had made a calculation, answered:

"That's--that seem fa'r, Matt."

"Cert'nly 'tis, Pink; I knowed you'd say so, an' you know I'd never wish to be nothin' but fa'r 'ith people I like, like I do you an' your wife. Let that be the understandin', then, betwix' us. An' Pink, let the understandin' be jes' betwix' *us*, for I've saw enough o' this world to find out that a man never makes nothin' by makin' a blowin' horn o' his business. You make the t'others pay up spuntial, monthly. You 'n' me can settle whensomever it's covenant, say three months from to-day. In course I shall talk up for the house whensomever and wharsomever I go or stay. You know that. An' as for my bed," said Mr. Pike finally, "whensomever I ain't here by bed-time, you welcome to put any transion person in it, an' also an' likewise, when transion custom is pressin', and you cramped for beddin', I'm willin' to give it up for the time bein'; an' rather'n you should be cramped too bad, I'll take my chances somewhars else, even if I has to take a pallet at the head o' the sta'r-steps."

"Nervy," said Mr. Fluker to his wife afterwards, "Matt Pike's a sensibler an' a friendlier an' a 'commodatiner feller'n I thought."

Then, without giving details of the contract, he mentioned merely the willingness of their boarder to resign his bed on occasions of pressing emergency.

"He's talked mighty fine to me and Marann," answered Mrs. Fluker. "We'll see how he holds out. One thing I do not like of his doin', an' that's the talkin' 'bout Sim Marchman to Marann, an' makin' game o' his country ways, as he call 'em. Sech as that ain't right."

It may be as well to explain just here that Simeon Marchman, the person just named by Mrs. Fluker, a stout, industrious young farmer, residing with his parents in the country near by where the Flukers had dwelt before removing to town, had been eying Marann for a year or two, and waiting upon her fast-ripening womanhood with intentions that, he believed to be hidden in his own breast, though he had taken less pains to conceal them from Marann than from the rest of his acquaintance. Not that he had ever told her of them in so many words, but--Oh, I need not stop here in the midst of this narration to explain how such intentions become known, or at least strongly suspected by girls, even those less bright than Marann Fluker. Simeon had not cordially indorsed the movement into town, though, of course, knowing it was none of his business, he had never so much as hinted opposition. I would not be surprised, also, if he reflected that there might be some selfishness in his hostility, or at least that it was heightened by apprehensions personal to himself.

Considering the want of experience in the new tenants, matters went on remarkably well. Mrs. Fluker, accustomed to rise from her couch long before the lark, managed to the satisfaction of all,--regular boarders, single-meal takers, and transient people. Marann went to the village school, her mother dressing her, though with prudent economy, as neatly and almost as tastefully as any of her schoolmates; while, as to study, deportment, and general progress, there was not a girl in the whole school to beat her, I don't care who she was.

## II

During a not inconsiderable period Mr. Fluker indulged the honorable conviction that at last he had found the vein in which his best talents lay, and he was happy in foresight of the prosperity and felicity which that discovery promised to himself and his family. His native activity found many more objects for its exertion than before. He rode out to the farm, not often, but sometimes, as a matter of duty, and was forced to acknowledge that Sam was managing better than could have been expected in the absence of his own continuous guidance. In town he walked about the hotel, entertained the guests, carved at the meals, hovered about the stores, the doctors' offices, the wagon and blacksmith shops, discussed mercantile, medical, mechanical questions with specialists in all these departments, throwing into them all more and more of politics as the intimacy between him and his patron and chief boarder increased.

Now as to that patron and chief boarder. The need of extending his acquaintance seemed to press upon Mr. Pike with ever-increasing weight. He was here and there, all over the county; at the county-seat, at the county villages, at justices' courts, at executors' and administrators' sales, at quarterly and protracted religious meetings, at barbecues of every dimension, on hunting excursions and fishing frolics, at social parties in all neighborhoods. It got to be said of Mr. Pike that a freer acceptor of hospitable invitations, or a better appreciator of hospitable intentions, was not and needed not to be found possibly in the whole state. Nor was this admirable deportment confined to the county in which he held so high official position. He attended, among other occasions less public, the spring sessions of the supreme and county courts in the four adjoining counties: the guest of acquaintance old and new over there. When starting upon such travels, he would sometimes breakfast with his traveling companion in the village, and, if somewhat belated in the return, sup with him also.

Yet, when at Flukers', no man could have been a more cheerful and otherwise satisfactory boarder than Mr. Matt Pike. He praised every

dish set before him, bragged to their very faces of his host and hostess, and in spite of his absences was the oftenest to sit and chat with Marann when her mother would let her go into the parlor. Here and everywhere about the house, in the dining-room, in the passage, at the foot of the stairs, he would joke with Marann about her country beau, as he styled poor Sim Marchman, and he would talk as though he was rather ashamed of Sim, and wanted Marann to string her bow for higher game.

Brer Sam did manage well, not only the fields, but the yard. Every Saturday of the world he sent in something or other to his sister. I don't know whether I ought to tell it or not, but for the sake of what is due to pure veracity I will. On as many as three different occasions Sim Marchman, as if he had lost all self-respect, or had not a particle of tact, brought in himself, instead of sending by a negro, a bucket of butter and a coop of spring chickens as a free gift to Mrs. Fluker. I do think, on my soul, that Mr. Matt Pike was much amused by such degradation--however, he must say that they were all first-rate. As for Marann, she was very sorry for Sim, and wished he had not brought these good things at all.

Nobody knew how it came about; but when the Flukers had been in town somewhere between two and three months, Sim Marchman, who (to use his own words) had never bothered her a great deal with his visits, began to suspect that what few he made were received by Marann lately with less cordiality than before; and so one day, knowing no better, in his awkward, straightforward country manners, he wanted to know the reason why. Then Marann grew distant, and asked Sim the following question:

"You know where Mr. Pike's gone, Mr. Marchman?"

Now the fact was, and she knew it, that Marann Fluker had never before, not since she was born, addressed that boy as *Mister*.



The visitor's face reddened and reddened.

"No," he faltered in answer; "no--no--*ma'am*, I should say. I--I don't know where Mr. Pike's gone."

Then he looked around for his hat, discovered it in time, took it into his hands, turned it around two or three times, then, bidding good-bye without shaking hands, took himself off.

Mrs. Fluker liked all the Marchmans, and she was troubled somewhat when she heard of the quickness and manner of Sim's departure; for he had been fully expected by her to stay to dinner.

"Say he didn't even shake hands, Marann? What for? What you do to him?"

"Not one blessed thing, ma; only he wanted to know why I wasn't gladder to see him." Then Marann looked indignant.

"Say them words, Marann?"

"No, but he hinted 'em."

"What did you say then?"

"I just asked, a-meaning nothing in the wide world, ma--I asked him if he knew where Mr. Pike had gone."

"And that were answer enough to hurt his feelin's. What you want to know where Matt Pike's gone for, Marann?"

"I didn't care about knowing, ma, but I didn't like the way Sim talked."

"Look here, Marann. Look straight at me. You'll be mighty fur off your feet if you let Matt Pike put things in your head that hain't no

business a-bein' there, and special if you find yourself a-wantin' to know where he's a-perambulatin' in his everlastin' meanderin's. Not a cent has he paid for his board, and which your pa say he have a' understandin' with him about allowin' for his absentees, which is all right enough, but which it's now goin' on to three mont's, and what is comin' to us I need and I want. He ought, your pa ought to let me bargain with Matt Pike, because he know he don't understan' figgers like Matt Pike. He don't know exactly what the bargain were; for I've asked him, and he always begins with a multiplyin' of words and never answers me."

On his next return from his travels Mr. Pike noticed a coldness in Mrs. Fluker's manner, and this enhanced his praise of the house. The last week of the third month came. Mr. Pike was often noticed, before and after meals, standing at the desk in the hotel office (called in those times the bar-room) engaged in making calculations. The day before the contract expired Mrs. Fluker, who had not indulged herself with a single holiday since they had been in town, left Marann in charge of the house, and rode forth, spending part of the day with Mrs. Marchman, Sim's mother. All were glad to see her, of course, and she returned smartly, freshened by the visit. That night she had a talk with Marann, and oh, how Marann did cry!

The very last day came. Like insurance policies, the contract was to expire at a certain hour. Sim Marchman came just before dinner, to which he was sent for by Mrs. Fluker, who had seen him as he rode into town.

"Hello, Sim," said Mr. Pike as he took his seat opposite him. "You here? What's the news in the country? How's your health? How's crops?"

"Jest mod'rate, Mr. Pike. Got little business with you after dinner, ef you can spare time."

"All right. Got a little matter with Pink here first. 'Twon't take long. See you arfter amejiant, Sim."

Never had the deputy been more gracious and witty. He talked and talked, outtalking even Mr. Fluker; he was the only man in town who could do that. He winked at Marann as he put questions to Sim, some of the words employed in which Sim had never heard before. Yet Sim held up as well as he could, and after dinner followed Marann with some little dignity into the parlor. They had not been there more than ten minutes when Mrs. Fluker was heard to walk rapidly along the passage leading from the dining-room, to enter her own chamber for only a moment, then to come out and rush to the parlor door with the gig-whip in her hand. Such uncommon conduct in a woman like Mrs. Pink Fluker of course needs explanation.

When all the other boarders had left the house, the deputy and Mr. Fluker having repaired to the bar-room, the former said:

"Now, Pink, for our settlement, as you say your wife think we better have one. I'd 'a' been willin' to let accounts keep on a-runnin', knowin' what a straightforrards sort o' man you was. Your count, ef I ain't mistakened, is jes' thirty-three dollars, even money. Is that so, or is it not?"

"That's it, to a dollar, Matt. Three times eleben make thirty-three, don't it?"

"It do, Pink, or eleben times three, jes' which you please. Now here's my count, on which you'll see, Pink, that not nary cent have I charged for infloonce. I has inflooned a consider'ble custom to this house, as you know, bo'din' and transion. But I done that out o' my respects of you an' Missis Fluker, an' your keepin' of a fa'r--I'll say, as I've said freckwent, a *very* fa'r house. I let them infloonces go to friendship, ef you'll take it so. Will you, Pink Fluker?"

"Cert'nly, Matt, an' I'm a thousand times obleeged to you, an'--"

"Say no more, Pink, on that p'int o' view. Ef I like a man, I know how to treat him. Now as to the p'int o' absentees, my business as dep'ty sheriff has took me away from this inconsider'ble town freckwent, hain't it?"

"It have, Matt, er somethin' else, more'n I were a expectin', an'--"

"Jes' so. But a public officer, Pink, when jooty call on him to go, he got to go; in fack he got to *goth*, as the Scripture say, ain't that so?"

"I s'pose so, Matt, by good rights, a--a official speakin'."

Mr. Fluker felt that he was becoming a little confused.

"Jes' so. Now, Pink, I were to have credics for my absentees 'cordin' to transion an' single-meal bo'ders an' sleepers; ain't that so?"

"I--I--somethin' o' that sort, Matt," he answered vaguely.

"Jes' so. Now look here," drawing from his pocket a paper. "Itom one. Twenty-eight dinners at half a dollar makes fourteen dollars, don't it? Jes' so. Twenty-five breakfasts at a quarter makes six an' a quarter, which make dinners an' breakfasts twenty an' a quarter. Foller me up, as I go up, Pink. Twenty-five suppers at a quarter makes six an' a quarter, an' which them added to the twenty an' a quarter makes them twenty-six an' a half. Foller, Pink, an' if you ketch me in any mistakes in the kyarin' an' addin', p'int it out. Twenty-two an' a half beds--an' I say *half*, Pink, because you 'member one night when them A'gusty lawyers got here 'bout midnight on their way to co't, rather'n have you too bad cramped, I ris to make way for two of 'em; yit as I had one good nap, I didn't think I ought to put that down but for half. Them makes five dollars half an' seb'n pence, an' which kyar'd on to the t'other twenty-six an' a half, fetches the whole cabool to jes' thirty-two

dollars an' seb'n pence. But I made up my mind I'd fling out that seb'n pence, an' jes' call it a dollar even money, an' which here's the solid silver."

In spite of the rapidity with which this enumeration of counter-charges was made, Mr. Fluker commenced perspiring at the first item, and when the balance was announced his face was covered with huge drops.

It was at this juncture that Mrs. Fluker, who, well knowing her husband's unfamiliarity with complicated accounts, had felt her duty to be listening near the bar-room door, left, and quickly afterwards appeared before Marann and Sim as I have represented.

"You think Matt Pike ain't tryin' to settle with your pa with a dollar? I'm goin' to make him keep his dollar, an' I'm goin' to give him somethin' to go 'long with it."

"The good Lord have mercy upon us!" exclaimed Marann, springing up and catching hold of her mother's skirts, as she began her advance towards the bar-room. "Oh, ma! for the Lord's sake!--Sim, Sim, Sim, if you care *anything* for me in this wide world, don't let ma go into that room!"

"Missis Fluker," said Sim, rising instantly, "wait jest two minutes till I see Mr. Pike on some pressin' business; I won't keep you over two minutes a-waitin'."

He took her, set her down in a chair trembling, looked at her a moment as she began to weep, then, going out and closing the door, strode rapidly to the bar-room.

"Let me help you settle your board-bill, Mr. Pike, by payin' you a little one I owe you."

Doubling his fist, he struck out with a blow that felled the deputy to the floor. Then catching him by his heels, he dragged him out of the house into the street. Lifting his foot above his face, he said:

"You stir till I tell you, an' I'll stomp your nose down even with the balance of your mean face. 'Tain't exactly my business how you cheated Mr. Fluker, though, 'pon my soul, I never knowed a trifliner, lowdowner trick. But *I* owed you myself for your talkin' 'bout and your lyin' 'bout me, and now I've paid you; an' ef you only knowed it, I've saved you from a gig-whippin'. Now you may git up."

"Here's his dollar, Sim," said Mr. Fluker, throwing it out of the window. "Nervy say make him take it."

The vanquished, not daring to refuse, pocketed the coin, and slunk away amid the jeers of a score of villagers who had been drawn to the scene.

In all human probability the late omission of the shaking of Sim's and Marann's hands was compensated at their parting that afternoon. I am more confident on this point because at the end of the year those hands were joined inseparably by the preacher. But this was when they had all gone back to their old home; for if Mr. Fluker did not become fully convinced that his mathematical education was not advanced quite enough for all the exigencies of hotel-keeping, his wife declared that she had had enough of it, and that she and Marann were going home. Mr. Fluker may be said, therefore, to have followed, rather than led, his family on the return.

As for the deputy, finding that if he did not leave it voluntarily he would be drummed out of the village, he departed, whither I do not remember if anybody ever knew.