

## COMPLIANCE

I look up at the clock on the wall. A quarter to nine. I wait for Miss Flood's light knock on my door. I listen but hear nothing. I continue to wait. The world beyond my office is a muffled, soft-carpeted silence. My eyes have settled on the photograph of my mother and father. It stands by itself on a shelf by the coat-stand. They look out at me – arm-in-arm, indivisible – from within a silver filigree frame. It is a photograph which brings me little in the way of gentle memory. I check my wristwatch.

Now, it is nine o'clock ...

And now, a quarter past nine ...

Miss Flood knocks and enters. She places my morning coffee and today's edition of *The Times* on my desk. She offers no explanation for the delay. This, I admit, surprises me. Miss Flood and I are creatures of habit and, over the years, our routines have served us well. It seems that today will be different. Miss Flood closes the door behind her and is gone. A sweet breath – wild flowers in a hedgerow – remains. Is it only with hindsight that I now suggest Miss Flood may have appeared a little 'agitated'?

A moment later she shows in the first client of the day.

How I dislike matrimonial cases. Invariably they end badly. Dignity and generosity are driven from the field by cruelty and recrimination. We in the legal profession stand accused of aiding and abetting this process. It is a charge I cannot refute. As soon I can, I hand over matrimonial cases to my partner, Parkinson. Parkinson is not squeamish. He has few qualms. Indeed, I suspect he relishes the involvement with the intimacies of the married state. One which, like me, he has not so far enjoyed. The client delivers herself of the facts concisely and with little sentiment. A clear-sighted, well-educated woman, the mystery is what once could have attracted her to her duplicitous husband. She might have ignored his squalid affairs, she tells me, if his serial philandering had not had such a deleterious effect on their joint finances. Her chief irritation is the requirement to expend time and energy on such dismal proceedings. Alas, as the interview progresses, I sense the first stirrings of interest in the minutiae of equitable settlements and fair

distributions. I fear this will not rest. At her next visit, Parkinson will fan the flames of her litigious ambitions and a spark will be breathed into bitter life. How I dislike matrimonial cases.

At eleven o'clock Miss Flood brings me my second cup of coffee with a garibaldi biscuit. This is quite usual although there are seasons when Miss Flood favours the chocolate bourbon. Much less usual is the appearance of Parkinson behind, and then beside, Miss Flood. There is a pause which, for an embarrassed moment, I think may be mine to fill. Fortunately it is not.

Parkinson shuffles forward as if nudged from behind.

—Miss Flood and I ... Florence and I ...

A further shuffle.

—We have something to tell you. Miss Flood and I are ...

He pulls at his ear. Miss Flood looks down at the carpet.

—We are engaged to be married.

A frozen instant. But I am not slow on such occasions. I stand up and shake Parkinson warmly by the hand. More warmly than for many years. After this, and with some ceremony, I kiss Miss Flood on both her cheeks. Something I do not believe I have ever done before. My hand rests on her shoulder. Her eyes are fixed on the carpet. She is plainly moved. A further moment when none of us knows what to say and then they leave me.

I am wont to allow matters to settle before I attempt to digest them. I therefore pick up *The Times* and turn to the obituaries. I know that this is the habit of an older man but it is one I acquired in my youth. I take pleasure in contemplating the well-lived lives of celebrated strangers. If asked, I would say I find it 'affirming' although I would be hard-pressed to explain precisely what I mean.

And then ... I read the name again.

PETER WINTERMERE

I study the photograph more closely. No, I would not have recognised him. As is often the case with obituaries, the portrait is one that was taken in his youth. The piece itself is a restrained, respectful tribute.

*Performer, conductor, composer ...*

*One of the most eminent musicians of his era ...*

There follows an account of triumphs, awards, professional acclaim. A life that for years has been filled with activity and success.

*At the age of 69, after a short illness ...*

*He is survived by his wife, Julia ...*

Julia Morton.

To describe myself as their 'family solicitor' sounds so pompous but that, almost certainly, is how the Mortons would have described me. For two or three years, I acted on behalf of Julia's parents over some minor matters. When her father and mother died within weeks of one another, it was to me that Julia turned for help. She was alone and twenty-two years old. I meanwhile was nearing forty. I mention this fact because age has a bearing on the story.

Julia's father had left his affairs in good order and the estate would provide her with a sufficient income. She was, at the time, a student of music at a respected conservatoire. I gave her the advice she requested and she was grateful although no gratitude was necessary. After that, we corresponded only when the need arose.

It was three years before we met again. The young woman Miss Flood showed into my office was no longer the pale, timid creature I had known before. She was elegant and self-possessed. Of her companion I will only say that Peter Wintermere was a distinguished man of middle years. He spoke very little at first but was gracious enough not to look out of place in the office of a suburban solicitor. For most of the interview his attention was fixed on Julia. As was mine.

Julia spoke quietly but confidently. They had met, she said, at a concert in Leipzig and 'fallen in love'. At first they had dismissed their feelings for each other. Wintermere

was close to twice her age. Any sort of relationship was unthinkable. There followed a season of painful separation before the 'unthinkable' overwhelmed them and they recognised that they could not live without one another. It was too agonising to think that they could. After long discussions they reached their decision. This was the subject of our meeting.

In truth, they had little need of a solicitor. The terms of their compact had already been settled. My function was merely that of a witness. The agreement itself was clear, rational, courageous. They had confronted the mocking fact of the difference in their ages and faced it down. Julia was twenty-five; Wintermere forty-nine. She rehearsed the numbers in front of me. In five years' time Julia would be thirty and Wintermere fifty-four. All would be much as now. But five years later Julia — still in her mid-thirties — would be married to a husband approaching sixty. From this point on the gulf between them would widen. Here Julia paused and Wintermere spoke. He had no wish, he said, for Julia to be married to an old man. It would be insupportable for him to see his wife become his nurse, her love turning to duty, her passion changing to pity. Julia understood and respected his feelings. Hence their agreement. Peter Wintermere and Julia Morton would marry for ten years. They would make the very most of their life together. They would be happy. Then, once ten years had passed, they would separate. Irrevocably and without regret. Such were the terms of their compact.

Was there anything I might have said? I do not believe there was. I did what was asked of me, drawing up a document according to their instructions. They signed it in my presence. I had been their witness. I had performed my role.

I did not meet Wintermere again. From time to time I listened to his broadcasts on the radio and read about his concerts in newspapers and periodicals. By all accounts this was musically the most productive period in his life. Julia, who had set aside her own ambitions, travelled with her husband wherever he went. She and Wintermere were, she told me later, 'unashamedly happy'.

'Unashamedly happy.' I put down *The Times* and close my eyes. My thoughts return to Parkinson and Miss Flood. Should I be surprised by their news? I cannot

decide. I had not predicted it. That was certain. But perhaps I might have done. Parkinson's relationship with Miss Flood has always been different from my own. A manifestation of this has been his habit of addressing her as 'Flo'. Although meant playfully, 'Flo' does not sit well with Miss Flood. Indeed I thought the name pained her. But this must have been part of a courtship ritual about which I knew nothing.

I move to more practical considerations. How will Miss Flood's forthcoming nuptials affect her position? Will she — as Mrs Parkinson — leave our employ? This is a question that needs to be asked. To say that I am dependent on Miss Flood would be to overstate the case but we have worked together for many years and her departure would be a loss. However, it is a loss I have faced before. Twelve months ago, Miss Flood announced she intended to leave us. Quite why was never clear to me but I did not feel it was my business to enquire too closely. In order to minimise the disruption, Parkinson and I prevailed upon her to remain until a suitable replacement had been recruited and a smooth handover completed. To this Miss Flood agreed.

I will assert, with no fear of contradiction, that Miss Flood's supposed successor could never have fulfilled her role. Angie was entirely unsuitable. A harum-scarum flibbertigibbet. It puzzles me still that Miss Flood should have thought otherwise. Within days of joining us, Angie had announced her engagement to Charlie. There followed a time of high emotion — giddy weeks during which we found ourselves sharing the ups and downs of Angie's tempestuous relationship with her fiancé. When the storms finally abated and a date was fixed, there were wedding arrangements to be made, unmade and made again, and the work of the office was often set aside. During this disturbed and disturbing period, it was strange to find Miss Flood so 'girlish'. And stranger still to find that it suited her. Finally, one Friday afternoon, after a celebratory cake, joyful tears and sparkling wine, Angie left us while Miss Flood remained.

Years pass. Whether they pass quickly or slowly is often difficult to tell. There are times when life can seem interminable; other times when it is found to have hurried by unnoticed.

The ten-year term expired. As they had agreed, Julia and Peter Wintermere parted. I did not doubt they would. There were papers to be signed but none that required them to be present. I continued to handle Julia's affairs but, as before, there was little to be done.

I saw Julia Wintermere – Julia Morton – only once more. It was six o'clock in the evening. Parkinson and Miss Flood had left for the day. I was alone in the office. As on other occasions, there was no necessity for Julia to attend in person but this was what she wanted. I believe that somehow she needed to show herself to me. To provide proof that she had complied with the terms of the compact. To be seen as she was. Once more, she required a witness.

How can one describe the face of someone whose soul has died within her? Where does one look to find the words? It was shocking. I had never seen such a thing before. I expect never to see it again. After she had gone, I sat for some time, alone.

It is a quarter to one. My eyes return to the photograph in *The Times*. I study it closely. What signs am I searching for? Strength, courage, resolution? Such strength, such courage, such resolution. Wintermere's younger face stares back at me. Posed, poised, unyielding. No, I am no wiser.

Minutes pass ...

A minute, and a minute more ...

Now, it is one o'clock. The knock on my door. Miss Flood has brought me my lunchtime sandwich and apple. I look up at her. I find I have tears in my eyes. Tears which I do not attempt to brush away. Miss Flood puts down the plate. *The Times* obituary lies open on the desk.

PETER WINTERMERE

*Performer, conductor, composer ...*

*He is survived by his wife ...*

Miss Flood is standing beside me.

—I'm sorry, she says.

—Thank you, Miss Flood, I say.

—Nothing can go on for ever, can it? she says.

—No, Miss Flood, I say. That's right. Nothing can.

—There comes a time when things have to be resolved, she says.

—True, I say. Yes. That's certainly true.

Miss Flood remains a little longer. Then she goes. The door closes behind her. Wild flowers in a hedgerow. I listen to the silence and my eyes fall again on the photograph in the filigree frame. There is nothing to guide me and I look away.

Miss Flood is right, of course, right. She is a sensible woman and will make Parkinson a good wife. Better, I fear, than he deserves.