

**MR. FORTNER'S
MARITAL CLAIMS,
AND OTHER STORIES**

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Mr. Fortner's marital claims, and other stories by Richard Malcolm Johnston

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BY

RICHARD MALCOLM JOHNSTON

AUTHOR OF DUKESBOROUGH TALES

THE PRIMES AND THEIR NEIGHBORS, WIDOW GUTHRIE, ETC.



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PREFACE.

OF the stories in this volume "Mr. Fortner's Marital Claims" now appears for the first time. "Old Gus Lawson" was printed in the *Century*, "A Moccasin among the Hobbys" in *Lippincott's*, and "Mr. Joel Bozzle" in *Dixie*.

R. M. J.

Baltimore, Md., July 15, 1892.

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Mr. Fortner's Marital Claims.

CHAPTER I.

THE Fortners, long before I was born, had been living where they were when there occurred the incidents described in this story. It was two miles above the village of Dukesborough. The grove of lofty red-oaks and chestnuts made the square two-story mansion behind it seem low, and the latter would have presented a better appearance from the public road, two hundred yards distant, but for the lapse of years since it had been painted. Yet things inside and all about the yard were clean and tidy, and in the garden farther behind were some rose-bushes, pinks, jonquils, and any quantity of box. Mrs. Fortner (Mimy Pugely that was) born, brought up, courted, married,

and ever continuing to dwell there, had often complained and gotten some indefinite promises about at least one new coat for the house and one of whitewash for the palings; but there they stood just as they had been standing for nearly fifty years.

The head of the family, from his very youngest manhood, had been tall, slender, dark, and religious. The wife, of medium figure, slight in her youth, had now a little rotundity, owing, others said, to the good living she had always had, but more, she contended although smiling the while, to the work and the anxieties, and the other like things which had been her lot in this troublesome world. Many children had been born to them, some of whom had died, and the others, except Martha and Mary, the youngest two, had married reasonably well and settled not very far away. Martha, tall like her father with somewhat of his seriousness, and Mary, more like the mother, were both old enough to marry; but one thing and another had delayed them.

Not the want of beaux; for they were handsome, neat, and industrious. But it required a good many things to make a matter of that sort seem to fit satisfactorily all around. Martha, now twenty-three, had no fears of being called an old maid two or three years later on, and Mary, nineteen, merry-hearted, rosy, and round, behaved as if she regarded herself, and expected to regard herself always, as nothing but a girl. Both knew well enough that they needed to be in no great haste; for, after providing for their elders there would be enough of land and negroes left for them whenever it should be time. Besides, they were not the sort of girls who think they must surely be disgraced if not married by the time they are grown, or immediately thereafter. True, Martha for two years had been having her preference among the young men who came to the house, but nothing definite had come of it yet. She waited to see what time would do; and if it should appear that time would do nothing, then she would