

TWICE MARRIED.

CHAPTER XXI.

There were two persons in the room besides the little one; Thorne and the doctor, a grave, elderly man, who bowed to the lady, and, after a whispered word with Thorne, withdrew. Ethel sank on her knees beside the low bed and stretched out yearning arms to the child; the mother-love awakened at last in her heart and showing itself in her face.

"My baby!" she moaned, "my little one, don't you know your mother? Open your beautiful eyes, my darling, and look at me; it is your mother who is calling you!" Her bonnet had fallen off, the rich wrap and furs were trailing on the carpet where she had flung them; her arms were gathered close around the little form, her kisses raining on the pallid face, the golden hair.

The sheet beat on the window panes; the air of the room stirred as though a dark wing pressed it; a glow of the fire looked angry and fitful; a great, black lump of coal settled down in the grate and broke; in its sullen heart blue flames leaped and danced weirdly. The woman knelt beside the bed, and the man stood near her.

In the room there was silence. The child's eyes unclosed, a gleam of recognition dawned in them, he whispered his mother's name and put his hand up to her neck. Then his looked turned to his father, his lips moved. Thorne knelt beside the pillow and bent his head to listen; the little voice fluttered and broke, the hand fell away from Ethel's neck, the lids drooped over the beautiful eyes. Thorne raised the tiny form in his arms, the golden head rested on his breast, Ethel leaned over and clasped the child's hands in hers. A change passed over the little face—the last change—the breath came in feeble, fluttering sighs, the pulse grew weaker, weaker still, the heart ceased beating, the end had come.

Gently, peacefully, with his head on his father's breast, his hands in his mother's clasp, the innocent spirit had slipped from its mortal sheath, and the waiting angel had tenderly received it.

Thorne laid the child gently down upon the pillows, pressing his hand over the exquisite eyes, his lips to the ones that would never pay back kisses any more; then he rose and stood erect. Ethel had risen also, and confronted him, terror, grief, and bewilderment, fighting for mastery in her face—in her heart. Half involuntarily, she stretched out her hands, and made a movement as though she would go to him; half involuntarily he extended his arms to receive her; then, with a shuddering sob, her arms fell heavily to her sides, and he folded his across his breast.

CHAPTER XXII.

Mrs. Smith grew daily stronger, more like herself. Time and care and ceaseless affection had wrought their beneficent work, and mind and body were recovering a healthier tone; her interest revived, and her hold on life renewed itself. As the weeks drifted into months her condition became so materially improved that the anxiety of her family subsided and left room for other thoughts and interests; and finally her health was sufficiently re-established to admit of her husband's leaving them in the picturesque French village, while he returned to America.

The family would winter abroad and return to America in the spring for the wedding, which Blanche had decided should take place in June. June was a lovely month, she thought, past all the uncertainty of spring, and with the glory of summer beyond it.

Some weeks after General Smith's return to New York, Nesbit Thorne joined his relatives in the pretty Mediterranean village. The general had found his nephew so changed, so worn in mind and body, that the kindly old soldier became seriously alarmed, and insisted on trying the remedy uppermost in his mind. He had come, with unwavering faith, regard the south of France as an unfailing sanatorium, and he took his nephew promptly in hand, and gave him no peace until he consented to go abroad, never leaving him until he had secured his stateroom, and seen him embarked on his voyage.

Truly, Thorne was getting into a very bad way. His was not the nature that emits sweetness when bruised; it cankered and got black spots through it. And he knew no physician to whom he could go for healing; no power, greater than his own, to set his disjointed life straight. Love and faith, alike, stood afar off. The waters of desolation encompassed his soul, without a sign of olive branch or dove.

Norma, watching him with the eyes of her heart, as well as those of her understanding, learned something of all this. Thorne did not tell her, indeed he talked little in the days they spent together, walking or sitting on the warm dry sand of the coast, and of himself not at all. His pain was a prisoner, and his breast its Bastille.

But Norma learned it, all the same, and learned, too, that never while that stormy heart beat in a living breast would it beat for her. She faced the conclusion squarely, accepted it, and took her resolution. Norma was a proud woman, and she never flinched; the world should know nothing of her pain, should never guess that her life held aught of disappointment.

A letter from Blanche to Berkeley, written within the following month, contained the result of Norma's resolution.

"You will be surprised," Blanche wrote, "to hear of my sudden marriage to Hugh Castleton, which took place three days ago, at the house of the American Minister here in Paris. We were amazed—at least mamma and I were—when Hugh joined us here, and after a long interview with Norma, informed us that he had called father for consent and that the ceremony was to take place almost immediately. Hugh, as perhaps you know, is a brother of Mrs. Vincent, Norma's intimate friend, and he has been in love with Norma time out of mind. I do not like the marriage, and feel troubled and sick at heart about it. It has been so hastily arranged, and Norma isn't one bit in love with her husband, and don't pretend to be. Hugh is patient and devoted to her, which is my strongest hope for their happiness in the future. It seems to me so unnatural to make a loveless marriage. I can't understand a woman's doing it. Nesbit is going to Palestine and the East. He is miserably changed; his hair is beginning to streak with gray at the temples already, and the

lines about his mouth are getting hard. Think of how that selfish woman wrecked his past, and ask yourself if there is any justice—not mercy—bare justice, in letting her wreck his future, now that the child's death has severed the last link that bound them together. Has anything been spared Nesbit? Has not his heart been wrung again and again? Put yourself in his place, Berkeley, and acknowledge that after so much tempest he is entitled to some sunshine. How can Pocahontas stand it? Could I, if it were you? Could I endure to see you suffer? Do you think that if you were in Nesbit's place I would not come to you, and put my arms around you, and draw your head to my bosom and whisper—'Dear love, if to all this bitterness I can bring one single drop of sweet, take it freely, fully from my lips and from my love?'"

CHAPTER XXIII.

Berkeley Mason went on to New York in ample time to meet the incoming Cunarder. His sister accompanied him, and as it was her first visit to the Empire City, Mason arranged to have nearly a week for lionizing before the arrival of the travellers. Percival was allowed to come from Hoboken and join the party, in order that his mother's eyes might be gladdened by the sight of him the instant she should land. At the last moment, General Smith was prevented from joining his family in Paris according to his original intention, and having old-fashioned notions relative to the helplessness of ladies, and no sort of confidence in Blanche's ability to distinguish herself as her mother's courier and protector, he cabled privately to Nesbit Thorne, requesting him to defer his Eastern journey for a month, and escort his aunt and cousin home. Thorne changed his plans readily enough. He only contemplated prolonged travel as an expedient to fill the empty days, and if he could be of service to his relatives, held himself quite at their disposal.

Pocahontas was ignorant of this change of program or it is certain that she would have remained in Virginia. Her feelings toward Thorne had undergone no change, but, after the long struggle there had come to her a quiescence that was almost peace. So worn and tempest-tossed had been her mind, that she clung to even this semblance of rest, and would hardly give the risked the re-opening of the battle, which a meeting with Thorne would be sure to inaugurate.

She was glad to see her old friend General Smith again, for between the two existed a hearty affection, and more than glad to see Percival. That young gentleman's joy at being released from the thrall of school, coupled with the exhilaration of seeing his friends, and the prospect of a speedy reunion with his mother and Blanche, appeared to well-nigh craze him. It certainly required unusual vents for its exuberance—such as standing on his head in the elevator, promading the halls on his hands, and turning "cart-wheels" down the passages; accomplishments acquired with labor and pain from his colored confederates in the South.

In a marvelously short time after landing, the party were packed into carriages, and whirled away to their hotel, leaving their heavy luggage in the jaws of the custom-house to be rescued later by the general and Berkeley. As they left the wharf, Pocahontas noticed another steamer forging slowly in, and preparing to occupy the berth next that of the Cunarder.

A couple of hours after the arrival of the European travelers at the St. Andrew's Hotel, a squarely-built young man of medium height, with a handsome, bronzed face, and heavy, brown mustache, sprang lightly up the steps of the hotel and passed into the clerk's office. Here he ordered a room and delivered his valise and umbrella to a porter, explaining that he should probably remain several days. Then he turned to the book, pushed toward him by the clerk, to register his name.

The clerk, in idle curiosity, pulled the register toward him, opened it, and glanced at the name; it was the fourth from the top, just under Nesbit Thorne's—James Dabney Byrd, Mexico.

CHAPTER XXIV.

No; Blanche was not a clever woman; that could not be claimed for her; but her essential elements were womanly. Pain, grief, distress of any sort woke in her heart a longing to give help and comfort.

She talked to Berkeley in her gentle, persuasive way (she had not courage yet to talk to Pocahontas), and exerted her influence in Thorne's behalf; but she speedily discovered that she made little headway; that while Berkeley listened, he did not assent; that he put down her efforts, mainly, to personal attachment to her cousin, and was therefore inclined to rule out her testimony. She needed help; pressure must be brought to bear which had no connection with Thorne; someone from the old life must speak, someone who shared the prejudices, and was big enough and generous enough to set them aside and judge of the affair from an unbiased, impersonal standpoint.

When this idea presented itself, her mind turned instantly to Jim. Here was a man from the old life, a man reared as they had been reared, a man in no way connected with Thorne. Jim could help her, if he would, and somehow, Blanche felt assured that he would.

Jim had discovered their presence in the hotel very speedily and had joined the party, glad, with an earnest gladness, to see his old friends again, glad also to meet these new friends who had become associated with the old ones. Blanche had been attracted by him, as women, children and dumb animals always were attracted by him; he was strong, and yet very gentle.

She determined to speak to him, to make him understand the position, and to entreat him to exert his influence with Berkeley, and through Berkeley, with Pocahontas, to set this matter straight. She did not know that she was about to do a cruel thing; was about to stretch a soul on the rack and turn the screws. That fine reserve which enfolded the Masons like a veil precluded gossiping about themselves or their affairs. Blanche had never heard of Jim as the lover of Pocahontas—or if she had, it had been in an outside, intangible way that had made no impression on her.

Possessed by her idea, and intent on securing an opportunity for uninterrupted conversation, she asked Jim to take a walk with her. She had some calls to make, she said, and they would walk through the park. At this season the park was very beautiful, and she should like to show it to him; New

Yorkers were very proud of it. Blanche knew that she was doing an unconventional thing; but she had observed, rather wonderingly, the frank helpfulness with which Southern gentlemen identify themselves with each other's affairs, and she felt sure that in speaking to Jim she ran little risk of rebuff. Jim had known the Masons always, was of their blood; to put his shoulder to their wheel would seem to him the right and natural thing to do. Therefore Blanche made her request with confidence, and Jim, who had never in his life questioned a woman's right to his time and attention, went with her willingly.

They sauntered about for a time and Jim admired all the beauties that were pointed out to him, and showed his country training by pointing out in his turn, subtle beauties which escaped her; the delicate shading of bark and leaf-bud, the blending of the colors of the soil, the way the shadows fell, the thousand and one things an artist, or a man reared in the woods and fields, is quick to see, if he has eyes in his head. He pointed out to her a pair of birds were building, and called her attention to a tiny squirrel, with a plume-like tail, jumping about among the branches overhead. He told her stories of the tropics, too, and of the strange picturesque life in the land of the Montezumas, and made himself pleasant in a cheery, companionable way that was very winning. He was pleased with Blanche, and thought that his old friend had done well for himself in securing the love of the sweet-faced maiden at his side. He liked talking to her, and walking beside her in the sunshine; he decided that "Berke" was a deuced lucky fellow, and had fallen on his feet," and he was glad of that.

After awhile they turned into an unfrequented walk, and Blanche seized her opportunity. She made Jim sit down on a bench under the old elm tree and seated herself beside him. Then, insensibly and deftly, she turned the talk to Virginia. She spoke of his old home, and praised its beauty, and told him how a love for it had grown up in her heart, although she was a stranger; she spoke of the cordial, friendly people, and of the kindness they had extended to her family; of Warner, his illness, death and burial beside poor Temple Mason. Then she glided on to Pocahontas, and spoke of her friend with enthusiasm, almost with reverence; then, seeing that his interest was aroused, she told him as simply and concisely as she could the story of her cousin's love for Pocahontas, and the position in which the affair now stood.

Jim never moved; he sat like a man carved out of stone and listened. He knew that Pocahontas had never loved him, as he had wanted her to love him; but the knowledge that her love was given to another man, was bitter. He said no word, only listened with a jealous hatred of the man who had supplanted him growing in his breast.

Blanche looked at him with tearful eye, and quivering lips; his gaze was on the ground; his face wore, to her, an absent, almost apathetic look. She was disappointed. She had expected, she did not know exactly what, but certainly more sympathy, more response. She thought that his heart must be less noble than his face, and she regretted having given him her confidence and solicited his aid. When they got back to the avenue, she released him from further attendance a trifle coldly. She would make her calls alone, she said; it might irksome to him, probably he had other engagements. He had been very good to sacrifice so much of his time to her; she would not detain him longer. Jim went down to the path and sat down again, not noticing her change of manner, and only conscious of the relief of being free from the necessity of talking commonplace, of being left to think this matter out alone. He thought vaguely that she was a kind, considerate woman and then she passed out of his mind.

The first feeling with which he grappled was wonder; a strange thing had happened. A few short months ago these people had been unknown to him; were, as far as his life had been concerned, non-existent. And now! Land, home, friends, love, all things that had been his, were theirs! His place knew him no more; these strangers filled it.

Pocahontas had been glad to see him again, but in her pleasure there had been preoccupation; he had felt it; it was explained now. He knew that she had never loved him, but the possibility of her loving another man had never come home to him before. He tried to steady himself and realize it; it ate into his heart like corroding acid. Perhaps it was not true; there might be some mistake; then his heart told him that it was true; that there was no mistake. She loved this man, this stranger of whose existence she had been ignorant that evening when she had said farewell to him under the old willows beside the river. She had been tender and pitiful then; she had laid her soft lips against his hand, had given him a softer from her breast. He moved his hand, and with the fingers of the other hand, touched the spot which her lips had pressed; the flower, faded and scentless, lay, folded with a girlish note or two she had written him, in the inside pocket of his vest.

The shadows blitted as the wind swayed the branches; the sound of women's voices came from behind a clump of evergreens; they were raised in surprise or excitement, and sounded shrill and jarring. In the distance a nurse pushed a basket-carriage carelessly; she was talking to a workman who slouched beside her, and the child was crying. Two sparrows near at hand quarrelled and fought over a bit of string.

His anger burned against Thorne. He could see no good in his rival; no tragedy, no pathos, in the situation. Had his life gone wrong? Doubtless the fault had been his. Did he suffer? Jim felt a brute joy in the knowledge of his pain.

A little hope came down the walk, trundling a hoop; it struck against Jim's foot and fell over. The helpful instinct that was in him made him stoop and lift it for her; she held a tiny thing, pushed back her curls and looked up at him with grave, wide-open eyes; suddenly her face dimpled; a smile like sunshine broke over it, and she raised her sweet lips to his, to kiss her thanks.

What had happened? A child's look, a child's kiss; it was a strange thing. He raised his head and glanced around, passing his hand over his brow like a man aroused from a delirium of dreams. Forces foreign

to his nature had been at work. He could not understand it—or himself.

Words came back to him out of the past—his own words—"a man must hold up his own weight," and other words, "a man must help with his strength a woman's weakness." He thought of his love with pity, with remorse. He had never failed her, never put himself first, till now. What was this thing he had thought of doing?

Jim stood erect and pulled himself together, lifting his head and squaring his shoulders as a man does who is about to face an issue fairly.

CHAPTER XXV.

Pocahontas was alone. The party had dispersed, one here, one there, about their own concerns, filled with their own interests. They had invited her to accompany them, even urged it; but she would not; she was tired, she said, and would rest; but there was no rest for her.

If only the scruple would die! If only the old influences would lose their hold; if only she could see this thing as the world saw it. Was she made different from others, that her life should be moulded on other lines than their lives? God, above! Why should she suffer, and make Thorne suffer?

Her mother, Berkeley, the dead brother whom she had exalted into a hero, the memory of the brave men and noble women from whom she had sprung, the old traditions, the old associations rose, in her excited fancy, and arrayed themselves on one side. Against them in serried ranks came compassion, all the impulses of true womanhood toward self-sacrifice and love.

The loneliness of the crowded hotel oppressed her; the consciousness of the life she was leading, did not touch her, gave birth to a yearning to get away from it all—out into the sunshine and the sweet air, and the warmth and comfort of nature. If she could get away into some still, leafy place, she could think.

Hastily arraying herself, she left her chamber and descended the broad stairway. She passed through the hall and out into the sunshine of the busy street; and Jim, who, unseen by her, was standing in the clerk's office, turned and looked after her. A troubled expression, like the shadow of a cloud, passed over his face, and he followed her silently.

A quiet street branched off from the crowded thoroughfare. Pocahontas turned into it and walked on. The roar of traffic deadened as she left it farther and farther behind; the passers became fewer. It was the forenoon and the people were at work; the houses rose tall on either hand; the street was still and almost deserted.

A man passed with a barrow of flowers—roses, geraniums, jasmín; their breath hung in the air fragrant. In a stately old church near by some one was playing; a solemn, measured movement. Pocahontas turned aside and entered. The place was still and hushed; the light dim and beautiful with color; on the altar, tapers burned before the mother and child; everywhere there was a faint odor of incense.

Pocahontas wandered softly here and there, soothed by the peace, comforted by the music. On one side there was a small chapel, built by piety in memory of death. Pocahontas entered it. Here, too, lights burned upon the altar, shedding a soft, golden radiance that was caught and reflected by the silver candlesticks and the gold and crystal of the vases. On the steps of the altar, and through a memorial window streamed the sunlight, casting on the tessellated pavement a royal splendor of blue and gold and crimson; against the dark walls marble tablets gleamed whitely. Near one of them, a tiny shield, a man stood with his head bent, his shoulder resting against a carved oak column—Nesbit Thorne, and the tablet bore the inscription: "Allen Thorne, obit Jan. 14th, 18—, set at 4 years."

Pocahontas drew back, her breath coming in short gasps; the movement of the music quickened, grew stronger, fiercer, with a crash of chords. Thorne did not move; his head was bent, his profile toward her; about his pose, his whole form, was a look of desolation. His face was stern, its outlines sharp, its expression that of a man who had had hard measure meted out to him, and who knew it, and mutinied against the decree. He did not see her, he was not conscious of her presence, and he knew that it was sent a pang through her heart. A wave of pity swept over her; an impulse struggled into life, to go to him, to take his hand in hers, to press close to his side, to fill the void of his future with her love. What held her back? Was it pride? Why could she not go to him? His unconsciousness of her presence held her aloof—made her afraid with a strange, new fear.

Footsteps neared, echoing strangely; the music had sunk to a minor cadence which seemed to beat the measure of their advance. The eyes of the woman were filled with a strained expectancy. Into the waiting place, framed by the central arch, came the figure of a man—strongly built, of noble air, of familiar presence. Eyes brave and true and faithful met hers gravely, a hand was outstretched toward her.

Pocahontas shivered, and her heart beat with heavy, muffled strokes. The counter influences of her life were drawing to the death struggle. Thorne tured; his eyes were upon her; he advanced slowly. Jim came straight to where she stood and took her hands in his; his face was pale and drawn, as the face of a man who has passed through the white heat of suffering. His hands were cold, and trembled a little as they closed on hers; he tried to speak, but his lips were dry and his voice inaudible.

"Sweetheart," he said at length, using the tender old word unconsciously, and speaking brokenly, "I asked you once to let the thought of me once—sometimes—when life should be hard upon you; to let the influence of my love stir sometimes in your memory. That would be wrong now—worse; it would be selfish and unmanly. A man has no right to cast his shadow on a woman's life when it has passed into the keeping of another man." His voice grew husky, his lips quivered, but he went bravely on. "I know your story—Berkeley has told me—the young lady has spoken—I take back the request. I'd rather all thought of me should be banished from you in this world and in the next, than that it should make a breach, even in the out-works of your life, to let in trouble to you."

He paused abruptly; through the strong frame ran a shudder, like the recoil from pain; but the man's will was firm, his pur-

pose steadfast. All of her life he had cared for her, been tender with her; shielding her from trouble, or grief, or blame, as far as in him lay, and, though his heart should break, he would not fail her now. Slowly he spoke again.

"Child," he said gently, "if I've ever said a word that hurts you, forget it, put it from you, if I did not understand then; I do now—and I'd give my right hand to recall it. What you do has always been right in my eyes—must always be right. I can never—his voice failed him; something rose in his throat and, choked utterance; he bent his head until his lips touched the hands he held, and then turned quietly away.

Pocahontas did not move; she scarcely breathed. The spell of Jim's magnanimity held her, made her realize, at last, the grandeur, the immensity of love. Her soul was awed. Thought followed thought through her brain; love in its sublimity was bared to her gaze; she fell away—burned as dross in the fire of suffering; to guide herself was not enough; she must aid and comfort others. If hands were outstretched in anguish, she must clasp them; if a heart cried to her in desolation, she had no right to turn aside. Was she so pure, so clean, so righteous, that contact with another soul—one that had known passions and sorrows of which she was, of which she must be, ignorant—should soil her? If so, her righteousness was a poor thing, her cleanliness, that of the outside of the cup and platter, her purity, that of unacquainted marble.

Thorne drew nearer; he raised her head; their eyes met; he extended his hands with a gesture not to be denied.

With a smile of indescribable graciousness, a tenderness, a royalty of giving, she made a movement forward and laid her hands in his.

CHAPTER XXVI.

Thorne did not accompany the party to Virginia, although it was tacitly understood that he should follow in time for Blanche's wedding, which would take place in June. Pocahontas wished it so arranged, and Thorne, feeling that his love had come to him as through fire, was anxious to order all things according to her wishes. He was very quiet, grave, and self-contained; his old buoyancy, his old lightness had passed away forever. The whirl and lash of a hurricane leave traces which not even time can efface. A man does not come through fire unscathed—he is marred, or purified; he is never the same. In Thorne, already, faintly stirred nature's grand impulse of growth, of pressing upward toward the light. He strove to be patient, tender, considerate, to take his happiness, not as reward for what he was, but as earnest of what he might become.

Jim remained in New York also. He would go back to his work, he said, it would be better so. He had come north on business for his company, and when that should be completed he would return to Mexico. He would not go to Virginia; he did not want to see strangers in the old home; he would write to his sisters and explain; no one need trouble about him; he would manage well enough.

Poor Jim! He could not as yet disassociate the old from the new. To him it still seemed as though Berkeley, and, in a measure, he himself were responsible for her life; must take care and thought for her future. Love and habit form bonds that thought does not readily burst asunder.

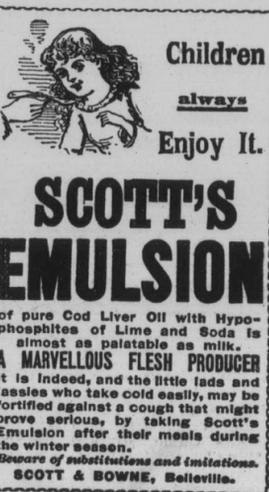
Berkeley was good to his sister—influenced partly by Blanche, partly by Jim, but most of all by his strong affection for Pocahontas herself. He drew her to his breast and rested his cheek against her hair a moment, and kissed her tenderly, and the brother and sister understood each other without a spoken word.

He could not bring himself to be cordial to Thorne all at once, but he loyally tried to do his best, and Thorne was big enough to see and appreciate the effort. There might come a time when the men would be friends.

Poor Mrs. Mason! Her daughter's engagement was a shock, almost a blow to her, and she could not reconcile herself to it at first. The foundation seemed to be slipping from under her feet, the supports in which she trusted, to be falling away. She was a just as well as a loving woman, and she knew that the presence of a new and powerful love brings new responsibilities and a new outlook on life. She faithfully tried to put herself in her daughter's place and to judge of the affair from Pocahontas' standpoint; but the effort was painful to her, and the result not always what she could wish. She recognized, the love being admitted, that Thorne had claims which must be allowed; but she felt it hard that such claims should exist, and her recognition of them was not sufficiently full and generous to make her feel at home with herself. Old minds adapt themselves to new conditions slowly.

However, mother-love is limitless, and, through all, her impulse was to hold to her child, to do nothing, to say nothing which would wound or alienate her. And for the rest—there was no need of haste; she could keep these things and "ponder them in her heart."

THE END.



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