

Marcus the Chattel.

A Tale of Two Half-brothers.

By Mrs. TALBOT HUNTER.

"MOTHER," said Eustace Poingdestre, lighting his cigar, "who is that lovely girl over there? And when did she come?"

Indolent Mrs. Poingdestre looked across the verandah to the gardens, where a beautiful quadroon stood amid a wealth of colour.

"That is Dolores, my seamstress, dear," she said listlessly. "Don't you remember? I bought her from Paquita Valdena a short time ago."

"Ah—to be sure! Well, I've never seen such beauty."

"Oh, nonsense," said Mrs. Poingdestre, stifling a yawn. "Dolores is well enough."

Twelve months had elapsed, most of which had been spent by Eustace in hunting excursions in the far North-west, so he remained ignorant of the momentous course of events at home.

When he once more presented himself at Bellefontaine his mother received him with a stern face.

"As soon as you have dressed, Eustace," she said, "come to my room. I wish to speak with you."

An hour afterwards he entered his mother's boudoir. She was standing opposite the door, a regal figure in her long sweeping skirts, holding an infant in her arms.

"Impiter!" cried Eustace. "What's that?"

"Your son," replied the lady, looking intently at him. "The child's mother, Dolores, my seamstress, who was my property, I have manumitted. The child himself, is your property? You are at once his father and his owner. What I demand of you is, that you manumit him at once. Are you willing?"

"Perfectly willing," replied Eustace with a smile that provoked a burning rejoinder from his mother.

"Very well," she said haughtily. "The child has been named Marcus. You will please have the manumission document made out at once, for at present he is simply Marcus, the chattel of a Louisiana gentleman, and as saleable in New Orleans as molasses or tobacco!"

"You shall have the paper to-morrow, Madame," said Eustace, briefly. "Is that all?"

"That is all?" coolly replied the lady. "I intend to provide for the boy's education, and while I live he and his mother will have a home beneath this roof."

Not long after this episode, Eustace Poingdestre brought home his bride—a beautiful Baltimore belle—and settled down to the systematic, make-believe hard work of a Louisiana planter. By-and-by a son was born to Eustace, and then the wife, who knew from the beginning the story of her husband's sin, hated the quadroon and her son, more vindictively than ever.

However, the boy, as she knew, had been manumitted by his father, and was safe in the protection of her mother-in-law, while she lived, so Adele Poingdestre could do no more than cultivate in the heart of her son a hatred of his half-brother, who had been born in the shadow of Canaan's doom.

So they grew up divided in their lives—though springing from one parent stock—"A little more than kin and less than kind."

One morning, Eustace Poingdestre was found dead—he had passed away in sleep. His will had long been made—an annuity to his widow, and the whole of his property, goods, and chattels, (human and otherwise) to his beloved son, Lucius Poingdestre.

It was an irreparable wound to the proud heart of Marcus that his father had not even mentioned his existence—indeed, but for the manumission document, he might have been amongst the chattels. He felt it the more, that he had formed a deep attachment to Lillian Calliver, a beautiful girl who was visiting Mrs. Poingdestre. Lucius also loved Lillian with all the strength of an ill-trained fiery nature, and so the life-long

feud between the half-brothers culminated in the supreme antagonism born of rivalry in love.

When Lillian went back to her home to Ohio, Marcus was the favoured suitor. Suddenly Mrs. Poingdestre fell sick, and the hopes of Mrs. Eustace rose correspondingly. She more than surmised that the bulk of her mother-in-law's fortune would descend by bequest to the unacknowledged son; the will, of course, was in the hands of the family lawyer, but the vindictive woman knew that if she could only gain possession of the manumission of Marcus she would be sure of both revenge and money; therefore, one afternoon, when her mother-in-law slept, she obtained the document from her private desk, and immediately burnt it to ashes.

"I'm quits now with that quadroon wench," she muttered, as she watched it burn to a blackened rag; "she wouldn't have parted with that for the State of Louisiana."

At the end of the week Mrs. Poingdestre died, and, on the will being read, consummate was the mortification of the plotters, to learn that her property was bequeathed—not to Marcus, but to his mother, Dolores, in trust for him. Mrs. Eustace was transported with rage, when she discovered that she had been outwitted. Then a shrill of triumph elated her, in the thought that Marcus, for whose future benefit this will had been devised, was by her own act, in the eyes of the law, the slave and chattel of her son, and as such could inherit no property.

That same night Lucius and Marcus Poingdestre confronted each other like the two elder sons of Adam.

"Where is my manumission?" demanded Marcus in an ominously calm and determined tone.

Lucius laughed viciously.

"The document's destroyed, my dandy nigger, I watched it burn to ashes, and you're now my property, you half-bred trash."

Like lightning the octoroon sprang at him, and felled him to the ground.

It was twilight in the swamp to which Marcus the chattel had fled for concealment, hoping that when a few days had passed he might finally make his escape to Sandusky.

Noxious insects tormented him, and noxious reptiles swarmed around him, but he endured the former and destroyed the latter, thinking them, even then, less loathsome than his own species.

Suddenly his ears—stung to their finest tension by the ghastly silence and the apprehension of capture—caught a far-away faint sound, never to be forgotten by one who has once heard it—a high-pitched, sostenente wail, like a long-drawn note of music. The sound made Marcus Poingdestre's bones to shudder, and he realised the terribly sublime image of the Temanite—the hair of his flesh stood up!

He had not speculated on this appalling possibility. He had supposed that after a season of hiding, the affair would blow over, and his brother would leave him to the hazardous prospect of making his escape. He had never calculated on being hunted like a wild beast by his father's son, nor had the practice ever been favoured by a Poingdestre in any emergency.

He stood beside a hollow tree-stump where his nights had been passed. On his flight from home he had secured his revolver and knife—the latter was necessary as a protection against the attacks of animals when out in the woods. The report of streams he wished to avoid, unless—

Lucius Poingdestre and two of his neighbours, attended by half a dozen hands as torch-bearers were following, as well as the difficulties of the ground would admit, a couple of Canan blood-hounds, when one of them suddenly fell—shot dead, Marcus, through a fissure in the bark, had picked him off as he struck the direct trail, and now turning the handle of his bowie towards his

throat, stepped from his ambush to face the other hound, which by instinct leapt at him. It instantly fell, streaming with blood. The fugitive, who now felt himself secure, rose and confronted his enemy, who seemed to quail before his glittering eye.

"Well, brother Lucius!" He held up his dripping blade. "Come down, you coward, and try conclusions! You'll have to fight for me, by—"

"Marcus! Marcus!" protested Lucius. "I have not come here to harm a hair of your head, but I beg you to return to Bellefontaine! I apologise for what I said. See—here is your manumission paper—"

"My manumission?" repeated the octoroon in amazement. "You said it was destroyed?"

"That was a fact, Marcus. It was destroyed—in a fit of rage, I am sorry. I seek you in reparation. Here is the necessary instrument, which insures your freedom—made out and signed by me—these gentlemen are witnesses."

"I see!" interrupted Marcus derisively. "You are so resolute in your benevolence that you absolutely hunt me like a wild beast in order to manumit me! Do you think me a fool?"

"I swear to you," cried Lucius, "that you are free, and these gentlemen have witnessed—"

"That's so—that's so," interrupted the two friends.

Marcus pondered for a moment. He was not in any way deluded by his brother's professions of good-will which were transparently insincere; but the document, being all the restitution that Lucius could make, was his right, and he was now inspired by anxiety to ascertain what marvel had turned the current of animosity in his two deadly foes.

"Give me the paper," he said curtly, "and ride back. You will see me to-night."

"Lucius Poingdestre," said Marcus in a cold bitter tone, as he stood in his brother's room that night, "I am not such a fool as to be guiled by any hollow professions of yours in restoring what you committed a crime to steal. You require some service at my hands—what is its nature?"

"Will you sign this paper?" asked Lucius nervously, "a simple statement that you have been legally freed, and are entirely your own master?"

"Willingly," replied Marcus, in some surprise. He wrote a few words rapidly and signed his name. "What more?"

"Nothing," answered Lucius, as with a smile of triumph, he read the paper and placed it in his pocket-book. "But before you leave me, I want you to read this."

He extended an open letter, and Marcus, stung by his brother's reviving insolence, took it from him, and read like one petrified:—

"Dear Lucius,—

"I have heard of the terrible calamity that has overtaken Marcus, and am distracted with sorrow. What I can do to save him from such a fate I will do. You have outwitted me to consent to our marriage. Search for your brother by night and day till you have found him, restore him to liberty, and I will be your wife."

"Lillian Calliver."

The paper fluttered from the hands of Marcus, and he staggered from the room.

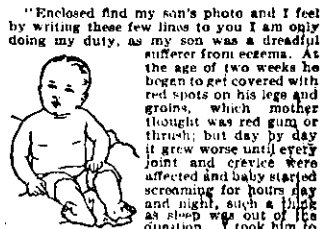
Outside, the octoroon, with wild eyes, looked up to the over-lasting stars, and cursed the memory of that father whose sin made him an Ishmael.

"Cursed be Canaan, a servant of servants shall he be to his brother."

"So those two lovely men were in love with you?" "Yes." "And they really fought a duel about you?" "Yes, yes." "Swords or pistols?" "P-pistols!" "How exciting! Were they loaded?" "No. Both of 'em were sober."

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