

A GOLDEN DREAM.

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CHAPTER XIV.—A STRANGE HOME.

The time glided by, and now that the first shock of surprise and what nearly approached to horror had passed, Aube found her surroundings less painful, though at times she shrank from the idolatry with which she was treated by the people who came about the place. It was little less from her mother and Cherubine, though her mother's tenderness was now mingled with sadness. There was a deprecating apologetic feeling in all her approaches which caused Aube no little suffering, and she strove hard to make her feel that she was happy and content.

Among the blacks and mulattoes who came to the house, there were only two who appeared strange. One of these was the tall handsome mulatto girl who seemed to have some strange influence with Nousie; and the other was the gigantic black with the knotted hair, who scarcely allowed a day to pass without making his appearance; and Aube noticed that he always watched her strangely, and on one occasion as she sat playing one of the old pieces which brought back her life at the convent, she saw that the room was darkened and that some one was looking in.

She shrank back into one corner of the room with her heart beating fast, for she had caught sight of the fierce black face and opal eyeballs of the man who had startled her before. Then the light came uninterruptedly again, and the dread passed away as she thought of the love of the black people for Nousie, and that the chords she had been playing had attracted the man to the window.

Madame Saintone came again and again, but always to meet with similar refusals, all of which she took good-temperedly enough, announcing that she should return to the charge until she succeeded; and her invitation had been supplemented by others brought by her son, whose visits to the cabaret were now daily.

They caused Aube but little uneasiness, only vexation that Madame Saintone should be so pertinacious, for in the midst of Nousie's passionate affection for, and worship for her child, it was plain enough to see that there was a nervous expectancy and dread lest she should be won over at last, and be ready to forsake her home.

Aube only encountered Saintone twice. He was enthusiastic, and aired all his graces and attractions to make an impression upon his mother's selection, but Nousie, who watched every look and word jealously, had no cause for suffering, as it was plain enough that Saintone's visits annoyed Aube, and he went away mortified and ready to declare that she was weak and unimpressible, or his visits would not have so far been in vain.

But after swallowing his disappointment he was ready to come to the attack again, his vanity seconding the feeling of passion lately evoked.

It was a strange life, and Aube would sit by her open window at night listening to the weird sounds which came from the forest, and ready to feel at times that sooner or later she would awaken from her last dream.

Then she would sigh and think that it was no dream, and sit and recall her peaceful life at the convent, her happy days with Lucie, and a faint glow would flush her cheeks at the thought of Paul.

Then the hot tears would come as in her heart she felt that she might some day have loved him, but that this was indeed a dream never to be realized—a something pleasant belonging to the dead past.

She had written to the lady superior and to Lucie twice since she had been out there, but her letters were guarded. The allusions to her mother and her home, were brief, but she dwelt at length upon the beauty of the country and the tender love showered upon her by her mother and her old nurse. But there was no mention of her position, and the agony she had suffered—no word to show that she was not happy.

"Why should I speak of my disappointment and the dissipation of all my illusions?" she asked herself. "I built up all those castles in the air; it is not her fault that they have all come tumbling down."

CHAPTER XV.—"NO ONE MUST COME BETWEEN US."

Nousie was seated at the back of her buffet one morning when all without was glorious sunshine, and in her heart all looked dark. The place and her avocations had suddenly grown distasteful, she hardly realized to herself why; and the great object of her life achieved, she sat wondering why it was that it hadn't brought her joy.

There were endless things to distract her. She was jealous of Madame Saintone, and she shuddered when Etienne came, but always after their departure she communed with herself as to whether she ought not to forgive the past and encourage her child to accept the intimacy at all events with Madame Saintone, who could offer her social advantages such as were wanting now.

Then she thought of leaving the place altogether and beginning a new life, but these thoughts were cast aside despairingly, for it she did this, her income would cease, and worst of all the gap between her and her child would not be bridged.

"I can see it—I can see it," she sighed. "My poor darling; she is struggling hard to love me. I never thought of it, but she is so different, and I can never be anything else but what I am."

Her musings that morning and the thoughts which always came to her when she was alone were interrupted by the entrance of Eugénie and the great black, who, after making sure that they would not be overheard, seated themselves, the black refreshing himself with a glass of rum, and Genie leaning over the buffet counter to speak in a low tone to Nousie.

"Where is Cherubine?" she said.

"Gone into the town."

"She has not been up to us lately."

"No; she has been so busy here."

"Ah, yes, the with pretty lady from over the sea."

"Yes," said Nousie uneasily, and, avoiding further allusions to her child, she entered at once into the business of her visitors, call, receiving certain orders from her which she undertook to fulfil. Then the

woman rose, made a sign to the black, and he followed her without a word for some distance along the road, till they were quite out of sight of Nousie's home, when she pointed up a side path.

"Go on, now," she said.

"You coming?"

"Not yet. Go on, and don't watch me."

The black laughed rather consciously, and turned up the path, to go for some distance before turning sharply round, and he was about to plunge in among the trees as if to retrace his steps, when he became conscious that the mulatto girl had followed him a little way, and was watching to see if he really went.

The black laughed and went on again, while after making sure that she was not being watched in turn, the girl returned to the road and sat down where she could command the way to the port and see who came.

She had not long to wait before she caught sight of Cherubine toiling along in the hot sunshine with a great basket on her head. She was singing merrily as she came, and from time to time raised and smelt a great bunch of flowers, smiling with satisfaction, and then she began singing again.

She was in perfect ignorance of the presence of any one else till she was abreast of the clump of thick foliage where Genie was standing, and then she started so violently that she disarranged her flowers by clapping both hands to her basket, which nearly fell.

"You, Genie?" she said. "You frightened me."

"I want to talk to you."

"Yes," said Cherubine, beginning to look uneasy, and trying to hide her perturbation with a curious laugh.

"You have stopped away from us," said Genie, sternly. "Why?"

"Oh, been so busy with young missus," she said hastily, "but coming again soon."

The mulatto girl fixed her with her eyes, and said in a low whisper:

"The serpent grows angry with his children who do not come; and if they stay away too much they grow sick and die."

"Oh, I come soon," cried Cherubine, trembling visibly now, and her black shiny skin seemed to turn dull and strange, as white rings appeared round the pupils of her dark eyes. "You tell him I'm not going to stay away any more."

"Take care then," said the mulatto girl, keeping her eyes fixed on the trembling woman. "You have not been since the two new white brothers came to us."

"No, no, not once," said Cherubine, trembling, "but I come next time."

"Yes. When did you see him last?"

"Yesterday," said Cherubine, eagerly.

"Where?"

"He came to Nousie's."

"I thought so," said Genie, in a low voice. Then added, "How many times has he been?"

Cherubine balanced her basket carefully on her head, and counted rapidly on her fingers.

"Eight times."

"What for?"

Cherubine smiled, then looked horrified.

"Don't look at me like that," she said, hastily, as she tried to take her eyes off her questioner, but stared at her again as if fascinated.

"I am not looking at you," said Genie, slowly; "it is the serpent looking out of my eyes. He is everywhere. He is asking with my lips why Etienne Saintone comes to Nousie's house."

"I—I don't know," said Cherubine, shuddering, and the rings about her pupils grew more defined.

"Mind what you are saying," said Genie, sternly.

"I only think," said Cherubine, hurriedly—"I think he fell in love with little missus. An' it's very dreadful," she said, in a whimpering tone, as she stood shivering in the hot sunshine, and watching Genie, who as soon as she had spoken turned suddenly, and went up the narrow path taken by her black companion. "Wish sometimes I never went to Voudoux. Frightens me."

For the next few minutes as she continued her journey back, the flowers seemed to have lost their sweetness, and she remained perfectly mute, but with the natural carelessness of her race, all was forgotten again in a short time, and she reached the house singing, to go straight to the window of Aube's room, call her by name, and laughing merrily she thrust in the bunch of flowers, kissed the little white hand which took them, and then went into the front room behind the verandah, where, in the dim light, she saw her mistress hastily put away a handkerchief, and on going closer with her basket, which she now held under her arm, she said, sharply:

"What missus cry about?" the sight of Nousie's red eyes completely chasing away all thought of her late encounter.

"Oh, I don't know," said Nousie, sadly. "I'm not happy, Cherubine."

"Nousie ought to be happy then," cried the woman. "Got lots of money, big house, and beauty once again."

"But she is not happy," cried Nousie, passionately. "Oh, Cherubine. It is killing me to see her look so quiet and sad."

"Ah, nonsense!" cried Cherubine, sharply. "She laughed just now when I took her flowers."

"Laughed?" cried Nousie, eagerly. Then with a sigh, "She only tries to smile when I take her anything."

She looked wistfully at her faithful old servant, for the revelation was coming fast with all its painful enlightenment, and the making clear to her of complications of which she had never dreamed.

Cherubine looked at her wonderingly, for she could not comprehend her mistress's trouble, and setting it down to one of her old fits of sadness, such as had often come to her since the terrible day when she had seen her husband shot down before her eyes, the woman took her basket into the house as horses' hoofs were heard, a shadow was cast across the verandah, and Saintone dismounted, threw the bridle across a hook, and entered the place.

Nousie looked at him sharply, as at a fresh source of trouble at a time when her spirit was very low; but the young man

came up to her with so smiling and friendly a look that she was disarmed.

"What a morning!" he said cheerily; "and how well you look, Madame Dulau." She winced, for his words and tones brought back compliments paid her by her husband's friend.

He noticed her manner and became serious directly, as he said in a half-reproachful tone:

"I thought that when a man joined you, he found help and friendship, but you always look at me as if I were an enemy."

"Ah, no," said Nousie, forcing a smile, "you are mistaken. What do you want me to do? You can help yourself now without going to anyone."

"Don't play with me, Nousie," he said, leaning over the counter and catching her hand, which she tried to snatch away, but he retained. "You know why I came. You must see that my mother approves of it, and though I am not good enough for her, still I would indeed be to her the best of husbands, and it would be for her good. There I am very poor at this sort of thing, but you know I love her, and I ask you humbly now for your help."

She looked at him wildly, for his prayer to her seemed horrible, bringing back as it did the past, and she shook her head.

"Oh, come," he said, "you say no because you think of that Voudoux business. I tell you frankly I got you to take me up that I might join them solely to help me in my election. You must not think about that. And yet," he said, with peculiar look, "I might say to you, do think about it, for I want your help."

"No," she cried hastily, "I am not one of them. I am their friend, and I help them and they trust me, but I do not belong."

"They think you do, and treat you as one of them," said Saintone, drily; "but I am going to put pressure on you in that way, Nousie—Madame Dulau, if you like—I believe my father and your husband were friends once."

"Oh!" she exclaimed wildly.

"Ah, yes; I've heard they became enemies, but what of that. They would have made it up again, so what is that to us. Let me speak plainly. I love Mademoiselle Dulau. My mother has tried again and again to make us all friends, but without avail. Now I have come myself; first of all as her messenger, to ask if she may send the carriage for mademoiselle this afternoon."

"She would not come," said Nousie, quietly.

"You have not asked her. I am not going to press my suit. I'll be as patient as you like, but let her come. The packet came in the morning and we are to have the captain and a few friends. It would be cheerful and pleasant for her, and she would meet some of our best people. You will let her come?"

Nousie's hand contracted, and she shook her head.

"Ah, but you are hard," he cried. "You are jealous of me. You think I am going to take her from you, but listen, Nousie: she is the dearest, sweetest lady I ever saw. Are you going to keep her amongst these blacks, and condemn her to such a life as this?"

She gave him an agonised look, for he had struck the chord which thrilled through her; and as she stood there suffering she felt that his words were right, and, growing weaker beneath the pressure put upon her, she withdrew her hand to stand with brow knit thinking:

"Ought she not to forget the past and accept her fate? She knew now that by her own act she had raised Aube far above her, and with her heart bleeding in its agony she acknowledged that she was dragging her child down."

"You do not speak," said Saintone.

"I was thinking," she replied, dreamily. "You say Madame Saintone sent you."

"Yes," he cried eagerly.

"I will ask her."

"No, no, let me ask her; let me plead to her," cried Saintone, fearing to lose the slight hold he had gained.

"No; I will ask myself. You need not fear," she added with a sad smile. "She shall go if she likes. I will be fair."

She left the buffet, and went thoughtfully into Aube's room, the place that was sacred to her, and pressing her lips together and trying hard to force down the agony within her, she closed the door behind her.

Aube had started to her feet and was looking pale and strange.

"He has come again, my dearest," said Nousie, softly. "He says he loves you, and Madame Saintone asks if she may send the carriage for you this afternoon. What shall I say?"

"That I will not go," said Aube, firmly.

"Stop," said Nousie now, fighting down her exultation, as she struggled as she told herself that her child might be happy. "He said to me what I have just begun to think, that I had made you a lady, and asked me if I was going to keep you down to such a home as this, here among these wretched people. Aube, darling, I feel as if I could not lose you, but would it not be best for you to go amongst these people?"

"No," said Aube firmly. "I will not leave you—I will not go."

Nousie's fingers worked, and her lips trembled, but she mastered herself again.

"You must think of what you are saying, my child. His mother wishes you to go—she would love you for her son's sake. He asks for you to be his wife."

"Mother?"

"Listen, my child; he will make you rich—a lady—the best people in the place who mock at me will welcome you, and as his wife—if you could love him—"

"Mother? said Aube, "are you going to be cruel to me now?"

"I, my darling?" she cried, catching Aube to her breast, "who would die for you?"

"Then why do you talk like this? You do not wish it?"

"I wish to make you happy, dearest, and to try and mend my poor mistake."

"Mistake? What are you saying. I could not love that man. His mother frightens me. She seems false and strange to me, and her daughter hates me in her heart. You wish me to leave you and go amongst those people. No, no: send me back to the peaceful old convent once again."

Nousie started, but controlled herself still, and after an effort.

"What am I to say then to this man?"

"That it is impossible. That I cannot go—that he is to leave us in peace."

"Is this from your heart, Aube? Look

at me before you send me with such a message as that."

"Look at you?" said Aube, tenderly, as she softly threw her arms about her mother's neck. Do you think I do not consider all that you have done. Mother, dearest, your letter rests here upon my heart. I look at that sometimes, and kneel down and pray that I may learn to repay you for all your suffering in the past. What are these people to us that they should try to come between when we are so happy as we are?"

"But you are not happy, Aube."

"I try to be," she said, with the tears flooding her eyes, "but you make me sad sometimes when you look troubled, and as if you were not content with me. Mother, I do love you with all my heart."

"Aube—my darling!"

She clasped her passionately to her heart, and Aube drew her face closer to her own.

"Yes; love me always like that, mother," she whispered, "I am happy now. Tell this man to go and trouble us no more. We have been parted so long, and I have come back again. Mother, dearest, nobody must come between us now."

They stood locked in each other's arms, heart beating against heart, till, as if waking from a dream, Nousie slowly drew herself away. There was a look of pride and peace in her eyes; her face too seemed almost beautiful once more, illumined as it was by her mother's love, and as she reached the door, she turned, ran back, and kissed her child again before hurrying out to where Saintone was impatiently waiting.

He stared as she came toward him, erect and proud looking, and as if some sudden change had taken place in the brief time since they parted.

"Ah," he cried, joyously, "She will come?"

"No, Monsieur Saintone," said Nousie firmly. "My child refuses, and asks you and your mother to leave us in peace."

A look of rage convulsed his face, and he turned upon her fiercely.

"It is not true," he said. "You have been setting her against me. I'll speak to her myself."

He made for the door, but Nousie interposed—at bay now to spare her child.

But her manner changed, and it seemed to Saintone no longer Nousie, the keeper of the cabaret, but Madame Dulau, wife of his father's old friend, who said firmly, and with a dignity of mien which startled him—

"Stop, sir!"

"Then after a pause—"

"You shall have it from her own lips."

She went through the door, leaving him pacing the room, and in a minute she came back, leading Aube, no longer the shrinking, timid girl, but calm and self-possessed, and looking more beautiful in his eyes than ever.

"Ah, Mademoiselle Aube," he cried, as he stepped forward and tried to take her hand.

"You wished to hear from me," said Aube gravely, "the words my mother said. Let me then say, monsieur, that I thank Madame Saintone for her kindness, that I cannot accept her invitations, and that all you wish is impossible."

"No!" he cried, hotly, "it is not impossible."

"Impossible," repeated Aube, and she turned from him to whisper, as she clung to her mother's arm, "No one must ever come between us now."

And the door was darkened as a man appeared dark against the sunshine which hindered him for a moment from seeing the group before him.

"Is this Madame Dulau's?" he said sharply.

Aube uttered a wild cry, while Saintone's eyes half closed, and his lips tightened, as he looked from one to the other, saying beneath his breath—

"Who is this?"

CHAPTER XVI.—A RIVAL.

Everything was dark and strange to Paul Lowther, coming in as he did from the glaring tropic sunshine, but he rushed forward excitedly at Aube's cry, and dimly made out a figure in white, whose hands were eagerly stretched out to him, and, obeying the natural instinct of the moment, he clasped that figure in his arms.

"Aube, my darling!" he cried.

She shrank from Paul's embrace trembling and confused, as Nousie looked wildly on, and a loud, angry ejaculation came from Saintone, which made Paul turn upon him, seeing more distinctly now.

But this glance at the strangers was only momentary, and he turned again to Aube, looking wonderingly at Nousie, then at the place, and back at Aube, whose hand he still retained.

"I could hardly find you," he said, "I have only just landed from the packet."

"Mr. Lowther!" faltered Aube, as she gazed at him wildly. "Why are you here?"

"Can you ask that?" he said. Then, with his eyes wandering once more about the place, "But my dearest girl, why are you here? This gentleman—will you introduce me?"

As the words left his lips Saintone could contain himself no longer. Half maddened before by Aube's firm refusal, the sight of this stranger who had been so warmly welcomed roused him to a pitch of fury, and he raged forth—

"Aube! Who is this man?"

"My friend, Mr. Paul Lowther, sir," said a sharp voice from one who had come forward unheeded, "and my name is Durham—Englishman—at your service. Who are you?"

Saintone glared at the speaker in astonishment, but turned back directly to Paul, who changed color, as he said:

"I beg pardon if I have come unceremoniously, but I thought this was a cabaret. Mademoiselle Dulau, in heaven's name, why do I find you in a place like this?"

Aube's lips parted, but her emotion checked her utterance, and she crept to Nousie's side, catching at her arm for support.

"Oh, I beg pardon," cried Paul hastily, as he struggled with the undefined apprehension which attacked him. "You live somewhere near. You will take me to Madame Dulau."

He bowed slightly to Nousie, whose eyes were fixed upon him angrily. "And this lady," he said, "is—"

There was a pause, during which Aube's lips struggled for utterance, and Nousie stood motionless and listening as a prisoner awaits the death sentence from his judge.

It was from no shrinking at her task, for

Aube's heart beat loyally and warmly then. She had chosen her path, and, martyr-like, she was prepared to pace it to the end, but no words would come. She glanced at Nousie, and saw that she was white and trembling. She could see Paul's colour coming and going, but the agitation of neither broke the spell which bound her, and her eyes wandered to Saintone, who was gazing at her fixedly, with a sneering laugh faintly appearing about his lip.

That aroused her just as Paul said again rather sternly:—

"Is it your servant? Am I wrong in asking what I did?"

"No," said Aube simply, as she passed her arm round Nousie's waist. "Mr. Lowther, that is my dear mother, Madame Dulau. Mamma," she continued, quietly, "this is Mr. Paul Lowther; dear Lucie's brother; and his friend."

She held out her hand to Bart, who drew a long breath after watching her keenly.

"You brave little darling," he said to himself, as he took her hand, and then aloud, "I bring you dear Lucie's love. My dear Miss Dulau, I am glad to see you again. Madame Dulau, I am afraid we have taken you by surprise."

He held out his hand now to Nousie, who drew a long breath too, and caught it eagerly, and held it for a few moments smiling pleasantly in a face whose frank honesty impressed her.

"Yes," she said quietly; "it was a great surprise to us both. Lucie's brother and his friend? You are very welcome to my poor home."

Paul seemed dumbfounded, but at last, evidently suffering painfully, he held out his hand to Nousie, conscious that under her mask of calmness, Aube was suffering agony, and watching her, wondering what she would say or do.

Nousie's brow wrinkled, and her face puckered a little with a deprecating smile as she looked at the extended hand, but she did not take it. It was not from malice, but Paul's words had cut deeply, and she could not help saying with a slight shrug of the shoulders—

"You wish to shake hands with me?"

"Yes," stammered Paul. "With Aube's mother. I beg your pardon, I did not know."

"No," she said simply; "how could you? I am not a lady. Only the keeper of this poor place."

She laid her hand in his for a moment, and as his own was once more free, Paul looked confusedly from one to the other.

His eye lit last upon Saintone, who stood watching them savagely, and as the young men's gaze encountered, Paul's confusion passed away, for instinctively he knew that he was face to face with a rival.