

A GOLDEN DREAM.

By G. Manville Fenn,

Author of "A Mint of Money," "Black Blood," "The Master of the Ceremonies," &c.

[ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.]

CHAPTER XVII.—Continued.

"Yes; what? Don't talk so slowly."
"Marry her, and get her away as soon as I could."

"Of course, yes. She must be got away at once. There was that black-looking fellow there too. It's of no use for you to contradict me; he's in love with her, and as jealous of me as can be."

"I'm not going to contradict you. I should say he is that way. Well, no blame to him. Any fellow would fall in love with her. I should if there was no Lucie in the world."

"She must be got away at once, and as for that half-nigger fellow, he had better mind."

"So had you," said Bart.

"But if that man goes to the house I shall shoot him."

"Mind he don't have the first pop at you, old man. Recollect that the nigger is lord paramount here; be ruled by me, and don't do anything rash. If you get showing fight our lives will not be worth an hour's purchase."

"But look here—"

"I do, old fellow. I'm assured heavily in a good office with leave to travel, and the officials were so kind and friendly that I wouldn't for the world behave badly to them."

"What do you mean?"

"Get killed and have my heirs, executors, administrators and assigns come upon them so soon."

"Now, my dear Bart, is this a time for your beggarly attempts at wit?"

"Best I've got in stock, old fellow. But come, be reasonable. It's hard, I know, to find that the lady we had stamped a lady is not a lady after all. But she's a precious, nice, sweet woman, wonderfully proud of her child, and that black Cherub worships her, and so do the niggers all about."

"How do you know?"

"She told me. There, let's have a cigar and a quiet think. You are, of course, upset by all this, and not in a position to judge calmly. Tomorrow we shall see things in a very different light."

As Bart spoke he glanced behind him once or twice, trying to pierce the darkness.

"I suppose you are right," said Paul, sighing; "but I shall never rest till I have her away from that wretched place."

Bart paused, took out his cigar case, and offered it to Paul.

"No, thanks. I can't smoke."

"Yes, take one," said Bart, in a low voice; "and as we are lighting up give a good look round without moving or seeming to notice anything."

"What do you mean?" said Paul, taking a cigar.

"We shall have to try the native weeds," said Bart; "these are nearly the last. Ready for a light? Now then."

He struck a match and held it up to his friend's cigar; then struck another to hold to his own.

"Fancy—being followed—heard a rustle—at the side," he said, in the intervals of puffing. "Be cool. Are you alright?"

"Yes."

"Then come along."

"See anything?" he continued, after a few moments.

"I thought I saw the gleam of something bright."

"Nigger's eyes," said Bart. "I saw a black face. We're being watched, old man. Let's get home to shelter. Don't take any notice. It may mean to see where we go."

Nothing more occurred till they reached the place where they had left their luggage, when Paul said, uneasily:

"Think that meant anything?"

"Yes. Black shadows," replied Bart. "I don't like weapons, old fellow, but we are neither in well-policed Paris nor within call of the Bow-street bobby, so let's unpack our revolvers, and take them with us when we go out."

Paul nodded, and then relapsed into a thoughtful state.

"And I laughed at him when he proposed bringing these tools. Said a lancet would be good enough for me," mused Bart, as he unpacked his portmanteau and took out a brand new six-shooter to turn it over. "Well, if I have to fire I hope I shall not hit Paul—or myself. I don't think I could hit anyone else if I tried."

An hour later he was fast asleep, and Paul was lying thinking, tossing feverishly from side to side, till getting into an easier position, he lay watching the stars through the open window, and thinking of the events of the day.

It was horrible! That sweet, gentle girl, brought up as a lady, fresh from the seclusion of the convent, to be suddenly brought to such a home as that, and evidently persecuted by the man he had encountered there.

"I've made an enemy already," thought Paul, and he began thinking then of their walk back to the town, past houses, dotted here and there amongst unbragging foliage, which offered plenty of concealment for anyone who chose to dog their steps. And it was not fancy, he knew, for he was convinced now, that the glance he had seen when the match was struck, was from a man's eye. Bart had seen a face, and it was evident that they had been followed.

But what for?

He had just reached this point in his musings when he held his breath for there was a faint rustling sound beneath the window.

It ceased directly, and Paul breathed freely again, attributing the sound to some nocturnal animal—a rat perhaps. Then he thought of the position of the house where they were staying—a large two-storied building nearly covered with luxuriant creepers that would form a harbor for wild creatures such as were probably abundant there.

Just then the rustling sound was repeated, and it struck him that it was like a hand grasping and shaking a stem of the tree trained all over the house.

The sound ceased again, but he lay listening, to be quite startled, for the noise came again accompanied by a faint breathing, and, as he lay on his side watching the window, something darker than the darkness appeared in the opening, and he knew that a hand and arm had been passed

in to grasp the window sill. The noise which followed was undoubtedly caused by a foot seeking for a resting place; and as this rustling ceased, something dark and round slowly eclipsed a star laid down on the horizon and he dimly made out the contour of a head.

Paul's hand stole beneath his pillow, where he had intended to place his revolver, but he remembered now that with his thoughts on Aube, he had forgotten it, and it lay on the table.

Without a moment's hesitation he sprang out of bed and seized it, making directly after for the window, but on reaching it all was perfectly still below; and though he peered out into the garden, and tried to distinguish the paths and shrubs, all was black there; and at last contenting himself with closing the window, he was about to return to his couch when Bart spoke.

"What's the matter?" he said.

Paul told him.

"Shouldn't wonder, old man," said Bart. "We've dropped into a nice place; but we can prove it as soon as it's light."

It was nearly morning when Paul fell asleep, and not much after sunrise when he started into wakefulness, to find the window open and Bart peering out.

"Hallow! Awake!" said the latter.

"I say, you were right. Someone climbed up here last night. The creeper's torn just below, and there are the marks of two wide-toed feet on the soft earth."

"What do you think it means?"

"Don't know. Piffing, perhaps. I hope it does not mean the knife. Say, old chap, I'd have practised for this at a pistol gallery if I had known."

CHAPTER XVIII.—NOUSIE'S STRUGGLE.

That night was the bitterest of all to Aube. Her heart had been full of regrets for the past, she had felt a cruel pang at the thought of losing so true a friend as Lucie, and the color had mounted to her cheeks as she had recalled her last meeting with Paul, and she had asked herself whether she loved him, as she knew he must love her. But she had shrunk from this inquisition, not daring to look into her heart of hearts lest she should find the truth and suffer more bitterly than she suffered now.

By a strong effort of will she had again that day to thrust the past further away from her, to forget all in her new career, and strive to be the loving daughter for whom Nousie had looked so long. Saintone had come there, and had that interview with her mother, in which with its warm glow reflected to her own she had seen her mother's love to her expand, she had realized her self-denial and willingness to sacrifice herself that her child might rise to a different grade; and in those moments she had felt that it would be easy to return her love as a devoted daughter, and that happiness was not impossible even then.

Then Saintone had received his rebuff, and in spite of the pain and excitement of the scene, Aube had felt her heart glow and a new light breaking in upon her life when the clouds had once more gathered round her. Paul had come, and she had seen the hope and love which beamed in her mother's eyes darken in despair. Paul, the man she knew now that she loved, the man who had followed her even there, had looked with horror upon her home and treated her long-suffering mother with bitter, cruel contempt.

How that evening passed she could not tell. Paul and his friend had been there all that time, and they had gone at last, after Paul had said words to her which she could not recall; leaving her, as it were, stunned by her position, and Nousie gazing at her from time to time with a mournful, despairing look in her eyes which cut her to the heart.

But she could not speak, she could not even try to comfort her, and with her breast overburdened with the chained-up loving words she longed to speak, their parting that night was constrained and cold.

Cherubine had gone also to her room, and the place was silent as Nousie stole into the nest she had prepared with such loving hands for her child. A bitter resentment filled her heart, and she looked angrily round in the darkness. But this passed away, and was succeeded by a painful sadness which she did nothing to combat, and she slowly and silently crept about the room with her tears falling fast, to lay her hand softly and lovingly upon the book Aube had been reading, upon her work, which she raised and kissed, and then upon the keys of the piano, one of which gave out a low faint note.

"My darling! My own husband's very own!" she sighed as she stood at last with her hands pressed to her brow. Then sinking on her knees and closing her hands she uttered a low wail.

"George, dearest," she cried in a low painful voice; "she loves him and he loves her, there is no room in her breast for me. I have done all you wished, and the world is empty to me now. Take me to you, darling, and let me die."

There was silence hand in hand with the darkness now in the little room, and misery and despair seemed to combine to crush the wretched woman down.

"It would be so easy," she said, "like sleeping to wake no more, and she would be happy then. He could take her back with him to the other land. All I have is hers! She would soon forget me—the servant who stands between her and her love. So easy!"

She started to her feet full of energy once more.

"No, not yet," she whispered. "What did his son say?—send those men away, while their lives are safe." With me gone he might come, and she would be so helpless.

She stood gazing away into the darkness, picturing her child's future, and realising how her help was needed for her protection.

"Not yet, George," she said, at last, in a low, sweet voice. "Not yet. Yes, she shall go with him—for she loves him—back to the other land. It will only be another parting, as I sent her once before. And then—"

She drew a long breath, and there was

firmness and decision in her next movements, as she went to the door, but paused with her hand resting on the side.

"Like his father," she said. "He might kill him or—the Voudoux—"

"Ah," she ejaculated, with her lips apart. Then with a sigh of relief, "Perhaps I am as strong there as he. Yes, she loves him. Back to the other land, and then—then—George, dearest, I am weary now; take me to you. I want to see you once again."

She crept to her room, but turned and listened by that which had been prepared with loving care for Aube; and after a little hesitation she opened the door silently, and a faint light illumined her sad face, as at a glance she saw that the bed was untenanted, and that Aube was kneeling by a chair with her face buried in her hands.

Nousie crept in silently till she could stand with her hands extended over her child's head as if longing to rest them there, but not caring to disturb her, and she stood in this attitude for some minutes, even her lips pouting as she bent forward with the gesture of kissing the glossy head so near.

"Asleep, dearest?" she whispered at last.

Aube sprang to her feet startled by the interruption, and flung her arms about Nousie's neck, nestling on her breast as if to find rest and protection there.

"Not in bed, dear?" said Nousie, softly stroking back the girl's dishevelled hair.

"No, I could not sleep."

"Praying?" said Nousie, softly.

"Yes, mother, for strength. The path is so hard to bear."

"So hard to bear," said Nousie, echoing her words as she raised her face and gazed tenderly in her eyes—"so hard to bear," she said again. "And you love him, Aube—you love him, Lucie's brother, who has followed you across the sea?"

"Mother!" cried Aube.

"Yes, said Nousie, softly. "You love him and he loves you."

"He told me he loved me."

"And you?"

Aube looked at her wildly, and then with a passionate burst of sobbing she buried her face in her mother's breast.

Nousie caressed her gently for a few minutes, and then said softly:—

"Well—he loves you—and he has come to take you back."

She uttered a low sigh, which seemed torn in agony from her heart, and then said gently:—

"I am rich, dearest, and it is Fate. He shall take you back. You will be happy, and I can go on and wait."

Aube raised her face, and shook back her long loose hair, with dilating eyes, she gazed in her mother's face, and for a few moments there was silence.

"Go!" faltered Aube at last, "back to Paris—leave you?"

"Yes, dearest—he loves you—you promised him your love once there?"

"No, no, no!" cried Aube wildly.

"But you love him, my own?"

"Mother, I do not know," cried Aube, wildly. "But go with him—leave you? It is impossible. I could not go."

"Yes; you could go," said Nousie softly, and with smiling loving face, though every word she uttered gave her an agonising pang. "It is to make you happy, dearest, and I have lived all these years alone, and worked for that."

"Yes," cried Aube excitedly, "I did not see it at all at first. I know it now. Leave your mother, knowing all this; what you have done for me—you think I would go. Have I not knelt and prayed for strength—for forgetfulness—that all this might be past. Mother, it is cruel of him. Why has he come to step between us now?"

"He loves you."

"No, no," cried Aube frantically, "he cannot love me or he would love you, too, my own patient, long-suffering mother. He loves me and dare to speak of you as he did today! Mother, do you think my heart did not bleed for you—that I did not suffer as I saw you suffer then?"

"Aube! My child!" panted Nousie hoarsely.

"Mother, yes, I love him; but it cannot be. Leave you? I would sooner die!"

"Don't—don't tempt me, Aube," whispered Nousie, as she tightened her grasp and her fingers enlaced as if to struggle with someone who was trying to tear her child away. "I will give everything, and you shall go back with him, while I stay and think of my own child, who came to me for awhile in answer to my prayer. Yes, dear, you shall go back—go back soon. I don't tempt me. I cannot bear it. I am so weak."

"Tempt you, mother?"

"With words like those again—those words you spoke today before he came. It is to make you happy. You shall go."

Aube uttered a low, piteous sigh, and tightened her arms about her mother's neck, as for some minutes they remained clasped in a loving embrace.

Nousie broke the silence, and there was a curious excitement in her utterance as she exclaimed:—

"Soon; you shall go soon, you could never be happy here. I did not know before. But I did it in my love for you, my own."

"And you did well," said Aube, tenderly, as she now led her mother to a couch. "It would not make me happy, dearest; it would break my heart and I should die."

"Aube," panted Nousie.

"Yes, Paul will go back and forget me. I could not love him now. It is all past. Mother, dearest, I say again all that I said today. I love you, and you alone. No one shall come between us now."

"Aube, my darling," cried Nousie, as with a fierce strength she dragged her child across her breast and held her tightly there as if she were a babe once more. "I cannot bear it. Don't leave me or I shall die."

"Leave you, no," whispered Aube, as she clasped her neck and nestled nearer and nearer still.

"Yes—like that," whispered Nousie. "Like you lay that day when wild with despair, I was dying. They had taken your father from me, they had killed him before my eyes, and I was dying, too. I tried hard to die that I might go to him; and Cherubine, as I was gliding fast away into the silent land, came and laid you in my arms. The touch made me start, and your little hands caught at me and played about my face, and your tiny lips kissed my cheek, and then you uttered a cry to

me, and that cry told me that I must live—for you, dearest."

"Mother!" sighed Aube; and her lips were pressed upon the trembling woman's cheek.

"And I lived—for you. Aube, my darling, I see all now so plainly; but love me as I love you, my own—my own."

"Mother!" whispered Aube, and her voice thrilled her to whom she clung.

"It was to make you happy that I sent you away; and all through those years I waited, wondering whether I could live the time through till you came back to me—those years—those long, weary years. Yes, I know," she continued with energy, "I am not worthy of you, for I have grown coarse and common; I, darling, who was once nearly as beautiful as you, and he loved me—your father, who gave you life. But I never thought of that how plain I grew—for I worked and worked to get money—for you, dearest—to make you what you are. And—Aube, my child, you will stay?"

"Mother, I will never leave you."

"Hah!" cried Nousie, hysterically, "and you will stay. Aube, my child, I can work for you, and I will try so hard to make you happy. That woman, Madame Saintone, and her daughter, with their scorn and pity. They shall envy you—you, my child. And you will stay?"

"Give me your dear love," said Aube, softly, "and help me to forget the past."

"And you will be happy then?"

"And I shall be happy then," whispered Aube. "Mother, dearest, I am happy now."

The hours glided by as they sat upon that couch locked in each other's arms, the bright sun filling the room at last as if with hope and strength, in answer to Aube's prayer.

CHAPTER XIX.—"OF MY OWN FREE WILL."

Aube was sleeping peacefully a little later on, and Nousie stole away with a look of pride and content upon her countenance, till she heard voices outside, and looking out, saw Cherubine in eager conversation with a couple of blacks lying near.

There talk was very earnest, and Nousie trembled slightly, but she drew herself up and waited till the woman entered.

"What is it?" she asked.

The answer she received made her change color and glance toward Aube's room.

"Don't let them, mistress," whispered Cherubine with her face looking leaden more than black, and she burst into tears.

"Are you sure?" said Nousie.

"Yes; they are waiting for them."

"And followed them home?"

"Yes, mistress, but don't let them, pray, pray."

"Hush, hush!" whispered Nousie. "Don't speak—don't look. I shall do something to stop it. It shall not be done," she added energetically.

Cherubine's face assumed its wonted aspect directly, and Nousie stood thinking for a few moments wondering how it would be best to proceed to avert a danger which she felt was grave, and which she saw would call for all the influence she possessed.

She had formed no plans when Aube came down a couple of hours later to find her looking abstracted and troubled, for Saintone's threat seemed to ring in her ears, and she knew that he had an influence to back him which was not his a month or two before.

Breakfast was hardly over, and the trouble was almost forgotten in her newly-found happiness when a fresh complication arose in the shape of a messenger bearing a letter.

Nousie took it and read it hastily, her countenance changing as she found a postscript in a man's hand whose import she grasped at once.

The words were:

"Remember what I said. She must come."

"Mother, dearest," cried Aube, "why do you look like that? Are you ill?"

"Ill? No, dear; only a little vexed. It is a letter from Madame Saintone, begging that we will not refuse her this time, and that you will go up there today."

"No, no; it is impossible," said Aube. Then hastily, "mother, dear, you must be ill."

"No, oh no; I was only thinking that perhaps—"

She stopped after speaking in a hesitating way.

"Perhaps what, dear?"

"It might be right to be friendly with Madame Saintone, and go there for an hour or two."

Aube was startled by this change of front, and gazed wonderingly at her mother whose lips parted to utter forth some explanation, when Aube turned crimson and then white, for Paul's voice was heard inquiring for Madame Dulau, and directly after he and Bart were shown in.

Paul's first movement was toward Aube with extended hands, but she shrank from him as if mistrusting her own powers, and giving her a reproachful look, Paul turned to Nousie.

"Madame Dulau," he said quietly. "I owe you an apology for my behavior yesterday. Believe me I was so overcome by surprise that I hardly knew what I said. You forgive me?"

"I have nothing to forgive," replied Nousie, "your surprise was natural."

"Then let us be brief and speak out as a man should under these circumstances. Madame Dulau, your daughter has been my sister's friend and companion for years."

"I know."

"And almost from a boy, though I rarely saw her, I grew up to love your child. Of the proof of that love for her, which she knows well, I need say nothing more than that I have followed her across the sea to ask your consent to our marriage. Give it to me; it is for her happiness and mine."

Nousie looked at him pityingly, and then at her child, who was deadly pale.

"Aube, dearest," she said, softly, "you are your own mistress; what shall I say?"

Aube fixed her eyes on Nousie.

"Tell him, mother, that it is impossible; that he must think of me no more, and that I pray to him for my happiness and yours to bid me, as dear Lucie's friend and sister, good-bye for ever—now, at once, and go."

She kept her eyes fixed upon her mother, and there was not a tremor in her voice as she spoke.

Nousie did not speak, but turned to Paul, whose face was set and hard.

"There is no need to repeat the words, madame," he said, "for I will not take them as being the true utterances of my

sister's friend. She could not be so cruel to one who loves her as I do. Well, if it is to be like this, I shall stay somewhere near to watch over her and wait."

"No," cried Nousie, excitedly, "you must not stay. Go back! Leave this place. Your life is not safe."

"I can protect myself," said Paul, scornfully. "I am not afraid, and I can and will protect your child. An unfair influence has been brought to bear upon her. I cannot, I will not believe those words are from her heart."

"Tell him, mother," said Aube, faintly; "it is true, and that I implore him to leave us in peace."

"Never," cried Paul. "You do not know me. Aube, I will stay in spite of everything and win you yet. You foolish girl," he continued, "you think because I find you in a home like this you ought to resign me. It is the greater reason why we should be one."

Aube shook her head.

"I know you better," he said, half laughingly. "Then, Madame Dulau, we will not take this seriously. I am refused, but if it is a hundred times I shall come again—always till I know that Aube loves another better than I hope and believe she loves me."

"No, no," cried Nousie; "for Aube's sake, for mine, you must go back. I tell you," she whispered, "your life is not safe if you stay."

"I am not to be frightened away," said Paul, coldly. "It would take far more than a threat of injury to send me back—alone," he added with a meaning look at Aube; and then he flushed and bit his lip for there were horse's paces outside, and Bart laid his hand upon his friend's arm.

"Steady," he whispered; be cool. Recollect where we are."

"Cool man; who is to be cool?" whispered back Paul, as Saintone entered, carelessly glanced at them and then passed them, going over to Aube, smiling at her as if they were her most intimate friends, and then to Nousie.