

A GOLDEN DREAM.

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CHAPTER X.—(Continued.)

Then for the next half-hour all seemed confused, and as it were part of a dream of a strange city with its bright houses and gaily-dressed people loitering about in the hot evening glow. She had visions, too, of gorgeous clouds, of a dusty road, then of patches of strange bright green foliage, and then the vehicle they were in, driven by a negro, stopped in front of a verandah about which a crowd of fifty blacks were gathered shouting and gesticulating, and waving hats and handkerchiefs.

The greeting was so boisterous that Aube felt scared and wondering that it should be in her honor. The thought occurred to her that this must be her mother's home by her plantation, but she had no time to think, for the door of the carriage was dragged open by a tall, black woman, who was laughing and crying wildly, as she caught at Aube's arms, then seized her by the waist and lifted her out, and, to the girl's astonishment and discomfort, carried her into the house and set her down on a couch.

The next moment the woman was on her knees kissing Aube's hands, sobbing and laughing together, as she went on talking incoherently.

"I'm Cherubine. You don't recollect Cherub, who carried you and rocked you to sleep? No, you were too little then. Oh, Mahme, Mahme," she sobbed, as Nousie entered the room, "she don't know me 'gain, but look at her, oh, look at her. My dear, my dear, my dear."

She was passionately kissing Aube's hands again, and as Nousie good humoredly tried to stop her, she bent down to the girl's feet, kissing them now, in her wild, hysterical joy.

At last she consented to leave the room, and save for the eager hurried buzz and murmur of talking outside, there was silence in the well-furnished parlor, whose door Nousie locked.

It was rapidly growing dusk now, so gloomy in the room that Nousie's features were indistinct, and she turned and approached the couch, from which Aube rose, trying to find words to say, struggling hard not to give way to the feeling of bewilderment and despair, which robbed her of speech, almost of the power to think.

But the effort was needless, for as her hands were taken she was pressed back upon the couch, and she felt in the gathering gloom that Nousie had seated herself as well.

Then there was a long drawn breath, and she felt herself softly, slowly and tenderly drawn nearer and nearer as a voice that sounded inexpressibly low and rich and sweet, murmured at her ear.

"Yes, it was like that I used to touch you for fear you should wake—yes, like that. I was so jealous of Cherubine. She would keep you so long. Yes, like that with your head there upon my shoulder, and my cheek against your little forehead. Is it real once more, after all these years, or shall I wake up as I have awakened thousands of times to find it all a dream?"

"And shall I awaken soon and find all this a dream?" seemed to be echoed in the girl's bewildered brain.

"No; it is no dream," sighed Nousie, as she held her child to her heart, and rocked her gently to and fro. "It was his wish, and I have done it. Aube—my child, my own!"

As Aube listened to the sweet rich tones of the voice so full of yearning love for her, the misery and despair grew faint once more, and in the darkness it was as if she must be dreaming, and this could not be the strange fierce woman she had encountered on the deck.

"All those years—long lonely weary years, Aube, and I have waited and waited, and now I could die of joy—the fierce joy I felt to have you once again. But no, I must live, for I have you, my own—my beautiful one. Aube," she cried now with wild energy. "He was taken from me so cruelly one day—your father whom I loved—yes; I was young then—he said I was beautiful—but I lived on for you, and it seemed like torturing myself to death when I sent you out there. And now you are back once more. Oh, my darling, my darling, try to give me little of your love."

Startled by the wild appeal Aube raised her head, and felt that Nousie had slipped from the couch to her knees, and was before her with her hands extended to her as if in prayer.

"Do you not hear me, Aube, my child? You will try and love me a little dear?"

The chord was struck again now, and as Nousie knelt there in the darkness before her child, her homely aspect, her strange garb, her home here amid the rough-looking negroes, were all forgotten. The heart string touched so passionately by the mother's hand gave forth its true, sweet sound, and Aube flung her arms about poor Nousie's neck, sobbing wildly as she cried:—

"Mother, dearest mother, I do love you with all my heart."

CHAPTER XI.—WORDS OF WARNING.

What are you laughing at?"

"Murder! look at him," cried Bart, taking his pipe from his lips, "ruffling up like a gamecock. Not laughing at you, my dear boy, but at myself."

"Oh!" said Paul, "I thought —"

"That I was grinning at you for coming on such a wild goose chase."

"Bart!"

"Steady, old man. I tell you I was not, but at myself. My dear old Paul, I can't afford to laugh at you because I am just as bad. Here we are, two days out on the briny sea, tossing about like mad, and I'm bound to confess that it seems quite natural. Only it does seem strange to me. Instead of attending lectures and seeing operations and waiting patiently till six months are over and I can succeed to my practice, here I am, bound for a savage island in the Caribbean Sea."

"Nonsense!" "Savage island! The place is cultivated enough."

"Oh, is it. You'll see."

"But I really feel it, Bart. It is kind of you to take this freak into your head. I've said nothing before, but I am glad of your companionship, and very grateful."

"Oh, bosh!"

"But I am. I never was more astonished

in my life than when I came on deck and found you here, just when I was cursing you by my gods as a false friend for not coming to see me off."

"Needn't thank me."

"What?"

"Thank your sister when you write."

"Luce! Her doing?"

"To be sure. Said you would be getting yourself scalped by savages or down with fever, and she gave me my orders to come with you as special surgeon and physician in ordinary, to grow you a fresh scalp and administer your Cockle's pills."

"My darling girl!"

"Steady! My darling girl now, if you please. For it's all right, Paul. You won't object, will you? She as good as promised me. Wonderful, isn't it? Such a girl as she is, so—so—so—I don't know what to say—oh, murder!"

For at that moment there was a heavy thud and a rush. The great steamer had been smitten on the bows by a wave, and a tremendous shower of spray had drenched the two young men.

"Well!" cried Bart, "this is nice, and no umbrella up."

"Only salt water, man, and it will not hurt you."

"Perhaps not," replied Bart, pettishly, "but it wets as much as fresh. I don't like to bathe with all my clothes on. Hang it all! Gone right down my back."

"Let's get a little more under shelter."

"No, I don't care; but Paul, old chap, you will not mind much, I know. I'm not pretty to look at, but I'll try to make her the happiest little woman in the world, and there—honor bright, I'll never try to doctor her myself."

"What?" said Paul, smiling for the first time since he had heard that Aube was to leave Paris.

"Well, I mean as some fellows do. I know medical men who try all kinds of experiments on their wives before they give the remedies to their patients."

"My dear Bart," said Paul, warmly, "there's only one man in the world to whom I would like to see Luce married, and that man is you."

Bart tried to speak but the words would not come, and he took his friend's hand, grasped it warmly for a few moments and then made a dart to get into shelter, for another wave struck the bows.

"Going to have a rough night, seemingly," said Paul, after a few minutes' pause.

"Looks like it," replied Bart. "It will be handy my being on board in case of accident."

"Oh, we shall have no accidents."

"So much the better; but now, seeing how rough the weather is, don't you think we are behaving very well?"

"We've had good practice, Bart. After all our channel crossings we ought to be trained for any weather."

"To be sure; that's it. Well, I never thought of that. Come, that's the only good thing I ever knew come from the channel passage."

"Well, gentlemen," said a bluff cheery man in oil skins; "got a bit wet?"

"Ah, captain, I did not know you," said Paul.

"Yes, we had a splashing just now. Is it to be a rough night?"

"Oh, nothing bad—nothing particular. Making the boat dance a bit, and the seats a little empty at dinner. Good sailors I see—you two."

"Don't holla till you are out of the wood," said Bart, laughing. "We are all right so far."

"If you can stand this you can stand anything. Thanks," said the captain, taking the cigar Paul offered. "We shall soon run through it, and then you will have hot sun and smooth water."

The captain lit his cigar, took a look round, said a few words to the officers in charge, and then came back to the sheltered spot where the two young men were standing, to smoke his cigar and have a chat, for as far as the passengers were concerned, the saloon deck was empty.

"So you are going to Hayti, sir?" he said.

"Yes," replied Paul, quietly.

"To paint, eh? Well, you'll never paint the place so black as it deserves."

"Perhaps it is not so black as it is painted," said Paul, coolly.

"Blacker, my dear sir—blacker. You'll have to take care of yourself."

"Oh, I shall do that."

"Don't know so much about that," said the captain, drily. "There's the fever."

"Well," said Paul, smiling, "I am travelling with the doctor here."

"You are lucky, sir, very lucky."

"But is the place so very unhealthy?" said Bart.

"No, not worse than any of the other islands, sir," replied the captain. "Of course everywhere in those seas there are epidemics of old Yellow Jack, and if you are not careful you may expose yourself and catch one of the malarious fevers, but the wretched people do everything they can to poison the place. The port is a perfect horror, and I never stay an hour longer than I can help for the sake of my crew."

"But that's from ignorance—the place being in such a state."

"Oh, yes, that's from ignorance, sir," said the captain, drily. "Plenty of that in Hayti. Superstition and brutal immorality too. Ah, they're a bad lot."

Bart glanced at Paul, who was pale, and he tried to change the topic, but the captain ran on, and it was evident that the young artist was listening eagerly and encouraging the sturdy old salt to tell him everything he could about the island that would be his destination.

"I wouldn't stay long, sir, if I were you," said the captain. "The country is lovely and you'll pick up some glorious scenes, and some quaint strange characters to paint; but of all the evil minded, weak, conceited beggars that ever existed they're about the worst. They believe themselves to be the most civilised people under the sun, while all the time they're a set of poor, weak, ignorant children—yes, children as far as their brains are concerned, and I don't know which are the worst—the whites the blacks, or the colored folk; they're all as bad as bad can be."

"A nice character you are giving them," said Paul, uneasily.

"Well, sir, they deserve it; they're as superstitious as the savages of the west coast of Africa. They don't stop at using knife, pistol, or poison against any one who offends them, and they make the place miserable by their filthy habits."

"Manners none; customs beastly," said Bart.

"Exactly, sir. The young middy who wrote that might have been describing some of the people of Hayti."

"Pleasant place for us, Paul, old man. Take my advice, gentlemen, and don't go. Try one of the other islands. They're quite as beautiful, and you may come back safe from them."

"Oh, no, we will not alter our plans," said Bart, after a glance at Paul. "But I say, what is that we read about the Voudoux worship?"

"Be on the look out, and try and see for yourselves. It's a savage kind of faith the blacks brought with them from the west coast of Africa, and the colored folks and the whites, some of them, join in it because it is an excuse for drunkenness and debauchery. Ah, there are all kinds of rumors about that sort of thing. They have wild feasts at times and offer sacrifice, I'm told, to a serpent. Rather a queer idea that, gentlemen, worshipping the serpent, eh?"

"But it would be interesting to investigate all the old superstition," said Bart thoughtfully. "I should not dislike seeing one of their meetings."

"Well, if you go to one, I should advise you to be careful," said the captain. "We look down upon that sort of thing as a degrading superstition; but to a fanatical negro under the thumb of his black priest it is a mystery, and he is ready enough to resent any slight upon his religion."

"How?" said Bart.

"Well, they tell me," said the captain, "that people who play the spy at their feasts give offence to the serpent, and if they offend it, they are seized with a lingering disease and die."

"Indeed?" said Bart, eagerly. "What disease?"

"Well, sir, if it were in your country, you being a medical man, would be for a post mortem examination, and it's my belief that the evidence you would give at the inquest would be that the sufferer died of poison."

"Yes, that is what I supposed," said Bart. "Of course. All those black people are pretty clever in their knowledge of poisonous plants."

"That's quite right, so I should advise you to be careful. Take my word for it, Hayti is not the place for ordinary civilized people, especially when we consider they have freed themselves from the white rule, set up one of their own, and in spite of their conceit and contempt for the white races, are going back fast into a state of savage barbarism."

"Poor wretches!" said Bart.

"Yes, sir, you are right. The place would be a paradise under a good government; but that is wanting, and all goes wrong. If you keep to your intention, be careful. Don't say or do anything to hurt their vanity. They think Hayti the finest place in the world, so if you want to get on mind and praise everything, especially the native himself."

The captain had finished his cigar, and Paul offered him another.

"No, thank you, not now," he said. "I must have a few of the loose tackle made fast; we are going to have a rougher night than I thought."

He went forward, and was soon busy giving orders, while the two young men sat in silence under the shelter of the weather bulwarks.

"Yes, that's what I'm most afraid of," said Bart, suddenly.

Paul started.

"Of what?" he said. "You did not speak before, did you?"

"No, but I was thinking hard."

"What about?"

"You, old fellow, I as good as promised Luce that you should not come to harm. Mademoiselle Dulau is very beautiful, and it makes me afraid."

"What are you driving at?" said Paul, impatiently.

"I'll tell you, old fellow. She is sure to be of some admirer, she will have been there a month before we arrive, and I fear that you will be getting into some trouble with these hot-headed—Oh! what a blundering fool I am to say a thing like that," he continued, as Paul sprang up impatiently and walked across the deck and back. "I say, I meant it for the best, old fellow."

"Of course, of course you did," cried Paul. "But it did sting, Bart, old boy. You are in love, too, and you can feel for me. It is that which I fear, and it is horrible to bear. How do I know to what danger my poor darling may be exposed. What plans her mother may have made, or how she will be situated there. It maddens me, and I call myself fool, idiot, a hundred times, for not going over in the same vessel, even if it had been as a stow-away."

"Oh, nonsense! don't mind my foolish talk."

"It was the honest truth, man. A whole month parted! Bart, I must get her away from this horrible place at all hazards."

"But it may not be so bad; and she is with her mother."

"How do I know what sort of a woman her mother may be. Then there's Mademoiselle Saintone. I distrust and hate that woman."

"Don't be unjust, man. You are not in a position to judge."

"No, I am not. But all this is unbearable, and even the winds and waves are fighting against me."

"And being beaten by our sturdy engines, as we'll beat the winds and waves of bad fortune. Come, man, don't make yourself miserable by imaginings. I dare say Mademoiselle Dulau's mother is a very nice, lady-like woman; and if she is she will appreciate you, and see that it is all for her child's happiness. There cheer up."

Paul laid his hand upon his friend's shoulder and gripped his hand.

"Thank you, Bart," he said. "I will hope for the best; but it is hard—very hard work."

As night fell the storm increased, but Paul Lowther heard neither the creaking of the rigging, the hiss of the wind through the ropes, nor the heavy dash of the waves against the steamer's bows, for there was a mental storm raging within him, and when toward morning he at last fell asleep it was to dream of Aube away in this strange land, exposed to some terrible danger and stretching out her hands to him for help.

CHAPTER XII.—"MAHME NOUSIE'S GIRL."

Only the other day leading the calm and peaceful life of the convent, pacing its shady walks with Lucie, caressed by the sweet, placid superior, petted by the sisters, the days had glided by with so easy and gentle a flow. There had been thoughts of Paul Lowther, happy and fluttering thoughts, such as will disturb a maiden's breast when she has always at her side a dearest companion and friend, ready to make suggestions and sing the praises of a brother who is a perfect hero in her eyes. Then, too, there was the unsatisfied longing to see the loving mother, whose letters came so regularly across the sea, full of eager inquiry respecting her child's health and happiness, full of delight, too, at the progress made. And then like a thunderbolt had come the change, eventful succeeding event with bewildering rapidity till Aube found herself half-stunned by her position at the house which stood upon the ruins of the cottage where she was born.

Again and again she had asked herself if it was a dream, but the reality was there before her, and she strove hard to hide the disgust she felt at her surroundings and the people by whom the place was besieged. During the first day or two her surprises were constant, and she awakened rapidly to the fact that while her mother's home was nothing more than a cabaret and store, whose customers were almost without exception the blacks of the neighborhood, this mother, who idolized her, was treated by the people in their rough way as if she were their queen. A word, even a look, was sufficient, and she was obeyed on the instant, while in their most boisterous moments Nousie's presence silenced them at once.

Aube heard Madame Saintone call her mother Madame Dulau, but there the name did not seem to be recognized, for the Madame had been softened into Mahme, generally made into two syllables, and her old, fantastic name of Venus—Venusie, as her husband had loved to call his beautiful wife, had for years past, become Nousie, almost from the day when, recovering from the prostration consequent upon the assassination of her husband, who had in his dying moment avenged himself upon his enemy, she had found herself the owner of some land and a pile of ashes to mark the spot where her happy home had stood.

This was after a long illness passed in a rough shelter in the forest at the back, where Cherubine had dragged half-burned boards, and cut leaves and bushes to help form a lean to hut. Here the black girl had passed her time nursing the sick and delirious woman, and playing with and tending the pretty child she worshipped.

It was a long, slow recovery, Nousie's doctor being an old black woman, a priestess of the Voudoux, whose herb decoctions allayed the fever, so that she struggled back to life.

For months Cherubine tended her, and though the black people scattered here and there brought her fruit, and occasionally a chicken or a few eggs, it was her girlish nurse who was the mainstay of her existence, keeping her and the child by the sale of the fruit and the flowers she collected daily and carried into the town.

It was Cherubine, too, who, from these small beginnings, gradually originated the business which had sprung up. It was the work of many years, but first one addition was made, then another, all of them suggestions from the keen clever girl, till, face to face as she was with poverty, Nousie had at last roused herself for her child's sake to actual participation in the girl's work, the old pleasant life of a colonist's lady had rapidly dropped away, and rapt in her love for her child, whom she had quietly sent to France, she had toiled on and on till she had arrived at the pitch she occupied at Aube's return.

This was literally that of queen among the half-civilized people; and Aube's first inkling of the fact was the morning after her arrival when after—with heavy heart—trying to partake of the breakfast pressed upon her by Cherubine, and suffering keenly from the feelings she strove hard to keep down she was quite startled by the buzz of voices outside the verandah house, and she shrank from the shaded window, trembling, and tried to occupy herself by looking about the room, which had evidently been prepared for her with loving care.

To her surprise she found endless tokens of refined taste, relics they were of Nousie's recollections of her past life. For she had taken Cherubine into her counsel, and regardless of the cost, had the rough ordinary furniture which had contented her during years of sordid toil, replaced by the best Port au Prince could supply. There was a piano, too, perfectly new, with the slightly rusted key in the lock, and a pile of new music in a canterbury by the side.

It struck Aube as being strangely incongruous of the surroundings of the place; but everything was so, even her presence there, and as she stood beside the instrument, her brow wrinkled, and she shrank from trying to gaze into the future—a future which was full of blank despair.

As she stood there the bustle and noise outside increased, a shrill woman's voice struck up a weird, strange song, whose peculiarity struck Aube at once, and made her turn her face toward the window just as the strain was repeated in chorus and was accompanied by the wiry chords of a native guitar and the thrumming of some kind of drum.

Then the one voice sang another strain, so weird and strange that Aube felt thrilled by the tones. It was not beautiful, but, like the air of some old country ballads, possessed those elements which appeal to every nature and never fail.

The chorus was rising again, accompanied now by the stamping of feet and the regular beat of hands, when the door was flung open, and Cherubine rushed in to literally fling herself at Aube's feet, seize her hands and hold them to her cheeks, before kissing them with wild, hysterical delight, her eyes flashing, her teeth glistening, and her bosom heaving with delight.

"Oh, you beautiful, you beautiful!" she whispered, hoarsely. "Kiss poor Cherub once more, like you did when tiny little girl."

Aube bent down and pressed her ruddy lips on the broad, black brow, with the result that as she knelt there Cherubine flung her arms about the girl's waist and burst into a fit of hysterical sobbing.

She checked it directly and showed her teeth.

"It's because she's so glad. Everybody glad Mahme Nouse's beautiful babe come back. Hark! how they sing and shout."

"Is that because I have come?" whispered Aube, who felt startled.

"Yes, and the flowers and the fruit." Cherubine was checked at that moment by the coming of Nousie, looking proud, flushed, and excited.

Her heavy inert ways seemed to have departed as she crossed the room to Aube, and took her hand, to hold it in both of hers for a few moments before kissing it tenderly.

"My dearest," she whispered; and Aube felt that in their eyes sixteen years of the past were as nothing—that she was still the little idolized child.

"That letter," she whispered to herself, and she looked gently at her mother, through the medium of its words, and leaned forward and kissed her.

Nousie's face changed. A spasm of mingled pain and delight shot through her. "My beautiful one!" she whispered fondly, as she pressed her child to her breast. Then drawing herself up proudly—

"They are all collecting from miles away. The news has gone round that you have come back, and they are asking to see you."

"These people?" cried Aube excitedly—"to see me."

"Don't be afraid, little one," said Nousie, fondly. "It is to see my darling. Aube, dearest, they are my people. Come."

Once more trembling, and as if in a dream, Aube resigned herself to her position, and, passing her arm round her, Nousie led her proudly from the room, the tall, slight figure, draped in white, beside the heavy looking woman in her garish attire—out through the verandah to where in the broad sunshine stood the crowd of blacks, at that moment in the full chorus of the wild, weird song.

As the white figure was led out the chorus stopped as if at the beat of a conductor's wand; there was a pause of some moments, during which Nousie drew herself up, looking proudly round, and once more her heavy features were illumined by animation, and she displayed something of the beauty of the young wife of old.

Then there burst forth a wild cry of delight, the crowd rushed forward, and through the mist of giddy excitement Aube saw that every one bore flowers of gorgeous colors and rough baskets of tropic fruit which they were pressing on her; but at that moment her gaze was rivetted by the fierce dark eyes of a tall Mulatto girl behind whom stood a herculean black with curiously knotted hair.

Aube did not flinch, but she was fascinated by the lurid eyes of the great black; and as she turned slightly aside it was to meet the half envious, half mocking gaze of the handsome mulatto girl, who held out to her a wreath of creamy strongly scented flowers.

"From Genie," she said aloud, "for Mahme Nouse's girl."

There had been silence while the mulatto who seemed in authority there spoke. Then there was a shout of delight.

Aube's lips moved as she tried to express her thanks, and she took the wreath to raise it to her lips. But her hands stopped half-way, and a slight shiver as of cold passed through her, while her eyes remained fixed, fascinated now by those of the giver of the wreath.

CHAPTER XIII.—A PRESSING INVITATION.

"You have not been to see her?"

"No; I promised you I would not; but I am going to break my word if something is not done at once."

"Don't be foolish, boy. I told you to leave it to me. She has only been home a week."

"A week! Long enough for me to lose my chance."

"There, you confess that it is a chance, Etienne?"

"Chance? Yes. There, don't strike me when I am down. I have told you I loved her, and as soon as you have won that concession you do nothing."

"Indeed!" said Madame Saintone. "Do you hear this, Toinette?"

"Yes, I hear," said the girl, contemptuously. "You people have gone mad about the wretched girl."