



CHAPTER XII.

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 distract 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 regularly across the sea, full of eager and happy respecting her child's health and happiness, full of delight, too, at the progress made. And then like a thunderbolt had come the change event 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 dragged into Madame, generally made into two syllables, and her old fantastic name of Venus—Venousie, 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, long illness passed in a rough shelter in the forest at the back, where Cherubine had dragged half-burnt 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 Vaudoux, whose herbs dispelled all the fever, so that she strayed back to life.

For months Cherubine tended her, and though the black people scattered were and there brought her fruit, and occasionally a chicken or a few eggs, it was her girl nurse who was the mainstay of her existence, keeping her and the child by the side of the fruit and the flowers she collected daily and carried into 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 quite 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 she awoke with heavy heart—trying to partake of the breakfast prepared upon her by Cherubine, and yearning keenly from the feelings she strove to keep down, she was quite startled by the buzz of voices outside the verandas 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, reliques 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 solid 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 to 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 towards the window just as the strain was repeated in chorus and was accompanied by the wry grins 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 pall.

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, literally flinging 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 a 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 Nousie'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 that idolized child.

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

"My beautiful one!" she whispered fondly, as she pressed her child to her breast. Then drawing herself up proudly they were 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 Nouse, 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 Nouse 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 veranda to where in the broad sunshine stood the crowd of blacks, at that moment in full chorus of the wild, weird song.

The white figure was led out the chorus stopped as if at the beat of a conductor's wand; there was a pause of moments, during which Nouse drew herself up, looking proudly round, and once more her heavy features were illuminated 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 gaudy colors and rough bunches of tropical fruit which they were pressing on her; but at that moment her gaze was riveted by the fierce dark eyes of a tall mulatto girl behind whom stood a herculean black with curiously knotted hair.

"Let me see? Ah, I have it. Drug clerks can read most any kind of writing. Let us go and see."

They were standing on the corner of Seventh and Vine streets not many nights ago. One of them had just received a telegram, says the Cincinnati Tribune, and now in this brief interview she had to battle with two ideas. Would she be standing in her child's light in checking all further intercourse? Or the other hand, if she allowed Aube to accept the invitation would she be doing that which sent an agonizing pang through her, leaving the gulf between her and her child?

"They will not dare to molest me," she said to herself, proudly; but all the same she could not help recalling the various troubles consequent upon the independent position taken up by the black race.

To her surprise, however, instead of being received by the people in sullen silence and with furtive looks, there were smiles and salutations, and one woman went so far as to offer her a few flowers.

Madame Saintone received these graciously as she was stepping out of her carriage, listening the while with some surprise to the tones of a piano, a few chords upon which were being struck carelessly. But the next moment she was face to face with the difficulty of her task, Nouse having left her child to hurry out to meet what seemed to her a danger.

"Ah, Madame Dulau," said Madame Saintone, smiling, but without offering her hand, "I have called to see your charming daughter. I think I have been most patient in waiting all these days before renewing our delightful acquaintance."

"What do you want?" said Nouse, suspiciously. "Why have you come?"

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

"Yes, and the flowers and the fruit."

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