

CHAPTER III.

THE MEETING.

But Denis Oglethorpe did not appear again for several days. Perhaps business detained him; perhaps he went oftener to see Priscilla. At any rate, he did not call again until the end of the week.

Lady Throckmorton was in her private room when he came, and as he made his entrance with as little ceremony as usual, he ran in upon Theodora. Now, to tell the truth, he had, until this moment, forgotten all about that young person's very existence. He saw so many pretty girls in a day's round, and he was so often too busy to notice half of them--though he was an admirer of pretty girls--that it was nothing new to see one and forget her, until chance threw them together again. Of course, he had noticed Theodora North that first night. How could a man help noticing her? And the something beautifully over-awed and bashfully curious in her lovely, uncommon eyes, had half amused him. And yet, until this moment, he had forgotten her, with the assistance of proofs, and printers, and Priscilla.

But when, after running lightly up the stair-case, he opened the drawing-room door, and saw a tall, lovely figure in a closely-fitting dress of purple cloth, bending over Sabre, and stroking his huge, tawny

head with her supple little tender hand, he remembered.

"Ah, yes!" he exclaimed, in an admiring aside. "To be sure; I had forgotten Theodora."

But Theodora had not forgotten him. The moment she saw him she stood up blushing, and with a light in her eyes. It was odd how un-English she looked, and yet how thoroughly English she was in that delicious, uncomfortable trick of blushing vividly upon all occasions. She was quite unconscious of the fact that the purple cloth was so becoming, and that its sweep of straight, heavy folds made her as stately as some Rajah's dark-eyed daughter. She did not feel stately at all; she only felt somewhat confused, and rather glad that Mr. Denis Oglethorpe had surprised her by coming again. How Mr. Denis Oglethorpe would have smiled if he had known what an innocent commotion his simple presence created!

"Lady Throckmorton is up-stairs reading," she explained. "I will go and tell her you are here." There were no bells in the house at Downport, and no servants to answer if any one had rang one, and, very naturally, Theo forgot she was not at Downport.

"Excuse me. No," said Mr. Denis Oglethorpe. "I would not disturb her on any account; and, besides, I know she will be down directly. She never reads late in the evening. This is a very handsome dog, Miss North."

"Very handsome, indeed," was Theo's reply. "Come here, Sabre."

Sabre stalked majestically to her side, and laid his head upon her knee.

Theo stroked him softly, raising her eyes quite seriously to Mr.

Oglethorpe's face.

"He reminds me of Sir Dugald himself," she said.

Mr. Denis Oglethorpe smiled faintly. He was not very fond of Sir Dugald, and the perfect gravity and naivete with which this pretty, unsophisticated young sultana had made her comment had amounted to a very excellent joke.

"Does he?" he returned, as quietly as possible, and then his glance meeting Theo's, she broke into a little burst of horror-stricken self-reproach.

"Oh, dear!" she exclaimed. "I oughtn't to have said that, ought I? I forgot how rude it would sound; but, indeed, I only meant that Sabre was so slow and heavy, and--and so indifferent to people, somehow. I don't think he cares about being liked at all."

She was so abashed at her blunder, that she looked absolutely imploring, and Mr. Denis Oglethorpe smiled again. He felt inclined to make friends with Theodora.

"There is a little girl staying at Lady Throckmorton's," he had said to Priscilla. "A relative of hers. A pretty creature, too, Priscilla, for a bread-and-butter Miss."

But just at this moment, he thought better of the matter. What tender, speechful eyes she had! He was aroused to a recognition of their beauty all at once. What contour there was in the turn of arm and shoulder under the close-fitting purple cloth! He was artistically thankful that there was no other trimming of the straight bodice than the line of buttons that descended from the full white ruff of swansdown at her throat, to her delicate, trim waist. Her unconscious stateliness of girlish form, and the conscious shyness of her manner, were the loveliest inconsistency in the world.

"Oh, I shall not tell Sir Dugald," he said to her, good-humoredly.

"Besides, I think the comparison an excellent one. I don't know anything in London so like Sir Dugald as Sir Dugald's dog."

Theodora stroked Sabre, apologetically, but could scarcely find courage to speak. She had stood somewhat in awe of Mr. Denis Oglethorpe, even at first, and her discomfort was rapidly increasing. He must think her dreadfully stupid, though he was good-humored enough to make light of her silly speech. Certainly Priscilla never made such a silly speech in her life; but then, how could one teach French and Latin, and be anything but ponderously discreet?

Mr. Denis Oglethorpe was not thinking of Priscilla's wisdom, however; he was thinking of Theodora North; he was thinking that he must have been very blind not to have seen before that his friend's niece was a beauty of the first water, young as she was. But he had been tired and fagged out, he remembered, on the first occasion of their meeting--too tired to think of anything but his appointment at Broome street, and Priscilla's Greek grammar. And now in recognizing what he had before passed by, he was quite glad to find the girl so young and inexperienced--so modest, in a sweet way. It was easy, as well as proper enough, to talk to her unceremoniously without the trouble of being diffuse and complimentary. So he made himself agreeable, and Theodora listened until she quite forgot Sir Dugald, and only remembered Sabre, because his big heavy head was on her knee, and she was stroking it.

"And you were never in London before?" he said at length.

"No, sir," Theo answered. "This is the first time. I was never even out of Downport before."

"Then we must take you to see the lions," he said, "if Lady Throckmorton will let us, Miss Theodora. I wonder if she would let us? If she would, I have a lady friend who knows them all, from the grisliest, downward, and I know she would like to help me to exhibit them to you. How should you like that?"

"Better than anything in the world," glowing with delighted surprise.

"If it wouldn't be too much trouble," she added, quite apologetically.

Mr. Denis Oglethorpe smiled.

"It would be simply delightful," he said. "I should like it better than anything in the world, too. We will appeal to Lady Throckmorton."

"When Priscilla was in London--" Theodora was beginning a minute later, when the handsome face changed suddenly as her companion turned upon her in evident surprise.

"Priscilla?" he repeated, after her.

"How stupid I am!" she ejaculated, distressedly. "I meant to say Pamela. My eldest sister's name is Pamela, and--and--"

"And you said Priscilla by mistake," interposed Oglethorpe, with a sudden accession of gravity. "Priscilla is a little like Pamela."

It needed nothing more than this simple slip of Theodora North's tongue to assure him that Lady Throckmorton had been telling her the story of his engagement to Miss Gower, and, as might be anticipated, he was not as devoutly grateful to her ladyship as he might have been. He was careless to a fault in some things, and punctilious to a fault in others; and he was very punctilious about Priscilla Gower. He was not an

ardent lover, but he was a conscientiously honorable one, and, apart from his respect for his betrothed, he was very impatient of interference with his affairs; and my lady was not chary of interfering when the fancy seized her. It roused his pride to think how liberally he must have been discussed, and, consequently, when Lady Throckmorton joined them, he was not in the most amiable of moods. But he managed to end his conversation with Theo unconstrainedly enough. He even gained her ladyship's consent to their plan. It was curiously plain how they both appeared to agree in thinking her a child, and treating her as one. Not that Theo cared about that. She had been so used to Pamela, that she would have felt half afraid of being treated with any greater ceremony; but still she could clearly understand that Mr. Oglethorpe did not speak to her as he would have spoken to Miss Gower. But free from any touch of light gallantry as his manner toward the girl was, Denis Oglethorpe did not forget her this night. On the contrary, he remembered her very distinctly, and had in his mind a very exact mental representation of her purple robe, soft white ruff, and all, as he buttoned up his paletot over his chest in walking homeward. But he thought of her carelessly and honestly enough, as a beautiful young creature years behind him in experience, and utterly beyond him in all possibility of any sentimental fancy.

The friendship existing between Lady Throckmorton and this young man was

a queer, inconsistent sentiment enough, and yet was a friendship, and a mature one. The two had encountered each other some years ago, when

Denis had been by no means in his palmiest days. In fact, my lady had picked him up when he stood in sore need of friends, and Oglethorpe never forgot a favor. He never forgot to be grateful to Lady Throckmorton; and so, despite the wide difference between their respective ages and positions, their mutual liking had ripened into a familiarity of relationship which made them more like elder sister and younger brother than anything else. Oglethorpe, junior, was pretty much what Oglethorpe, senior, had been, and notwithstanding her practical views, Lady Throckmorton liked him none the worse for it. She petted and patronized him, questioned and advised him, and if he did not please her, rated him roundly without the slightest compunction. In fact, she was a woman of caprices even at sixty-five, and Denis Oglethorpe was one of her caprices.

And, in like manner, Theodora North became another of them. Finding her tractable, she became quite fond of her, in her own way, and was at least generous to lavishness in her treatment of her.

"You are very handsome, indeed, Theodora," she said to her a few days after her arrival. "Of course, you know that--ten times handsomer than ever poor Pamela could have been. Your figure is perfect, and you have eyes like a Syrian, instead of a commonplace English woman. I am going to give you a rose-pink satin dress. Rose-pink is just your shade, and some day, when we go out together, I will lend you some of my diamonds."

After this whimsical manner she lavished presents upon her whenever she

had a new fancy. In truth, her generosity was constitutional, and she had been generous enough toward Pamela, but she had never been so extravagant as she was with Theodora. Theodora was an actual beauty, of an uncommon type, in the face of her ignorance of manners and customs. Pamela had never, at her best, been more than a delicately pretty girl.

In the meantime, Denis Oglethorpe made friendly calls as usual, and always meeting Theodora, found her very pleasant to talk to and look at. He found out her enthusiastic admiration for the poetic effusions of his youth, and in consideration thereof, good-humoredly presented her with a copy of the volume, with some very witty verses written on the fly-leaf in a flourishing hand. It was worth while to amuse Theodora, she was so pretty and unassuming in her delight at his carelessly-amiable efforts for her entertainment. She was only a mere child after all at sixteen, with Downport in the background; so he felt quite honestly at ease in being attentive to her girlish requirements. Better that he should amuse her than that she should be left to the mercy of men who would perhaps have the execrable taste to spoil her pretty childish ways with flattery.

"Don't let all these fine people and fine speeches turn your head, Theodora," he would say, in a tone that might either have been jest or earnest. "They spoiled me in my infancy, and my unfortunate experience causes me to warn you."

But whether he jested or not, Theo was always inclined to listen to him

with some degree of serious belief. She took his advice when it was proffered, and regarded his wisdom as the wisdom of an oracle. Who should know better than he what was right? His indifference to the rule of opinion could only be the result of conscious perfection, and his careless satires were to her the most brilliant of witticisms. He paid her his first compliment the night the rose-colored satin-dress came home.

They were going to see Faust together with Lady Throckmorton, and she had finished dressing early, and came down to the drawing-room, and there Denis found her when he came up-stairs--the thick, lustrous folds of satin billowing upon the carpet around her feet, something white, and soft, and heavy wrapped about her.

He was conscious of a faint shock of delight on first beholding her. He had just left Priscilla, pale and heavy-eyed, in dun-colored merino, poring over a Greek dictionary, and the sudden entering the bright room, and finding himself facing Theodora North in rose-colored satin, was a little like electricity.

"Oh! it's Theodora, is it?" he said, slowly, when he recovered himself.

"Thank you, Theodora."

"What for?" asked Theo, blushing.

"For the rose-colored satin," he returned, complacently. "It is so very

becoming. You look like a sultana, my dear Theodora."

Theo looked up at him for a second, and then looked down. Much as she admired Mr. Denis Oglethorpe, she never quite comprehended him. He had such an eccentric fashion of being almost curt sometimes. She had seen him actually give a faint start when he entered, and she had not understood that, and now he had paid her a compliment, but with so much of something puzzling hidden in his quiet-sounding voice, that she did not understand that either--and he saw she did not.

"I have been making a fine speech to Theodora," he said to Lady Throckmorton, when she came in. "And she does not comprehend it in the least."

It was somewhat singular, Theo thought, that he should be so silent after this, for he was silent. He even seemed absent-minded, for some reason or other. He did not talk to her as much as usual, and she was quite sure he paid very little attention to Faust.

But during the final act she found that he was not looking at the stage at all; but was sitting in the shadow of the box-curtain watching herself. She had been deeply interested in Marguerite a minute before, and, in her heart-touched pleasure, had leant upon the edge of the box, her whole face thrilled with excitement. But the steady gaze magnetized her, and drew her eyes round to the shadowy corner where Denis sat; and she positively turned with just such a start as he himself had given

when Theodora North, in rose-colored satin, burst upon him, in such vivid, glowing contrast to Priscilla Gower, in dun merino.

"Oh!" she said, and though the little exclamation was scarcely more than an indrawn breath, Denis heard it, and came out of his corner to take a seat at her side, and lean over the box-edge also.

"What is it, Theodora?" he asked, in a low, clear voice. "Is it Marguerite?"

She looked at him in a little fright at herself. She did not know why she had exclaimed--she scarcely knew how; but when she met his unembarrassed eyes, she began to think that possibly it might be Marguerite. Indeed, a second later, she was quite sure it had been Marguerite.

"Yes--I think so," she faltered. "Poor Marguerite! If she could only have saved him?"

"How?" he asked.

"I don't--at least I scarcely know; but I think the author ought to have made her save him, somehow. If--if she could have suffered something, or sacrificed something--"

"Would she have done it if she could?" commented Denis, languidly. He

had quite recovered himself by this time.

"I would have done it if I had been Marguerite," Theo half whispered.

In his surprise he forgot his self-possession. He turned upon her suddenly, and meeting her sweet, world-ignorant eyes, felt the faint, pained shock once more, and strangely enough his first thought was a disconnected one of Priscilla Gower.

"You?" he said, the next moment. "Yes, I believe you would, Theodora."

He was sure she would, after that swift glance of his, and--Well, what a happy man he would be for whom this tender young Marguerite would suffer or be sacrificed. The idea had really never occurred to him before that Theodora North was nearly a woman; but it occurred to him now with all the greater force, because he had been so oblivious to the fact before.

He sat by her side until the curtain fell; but his silent mood seemed to have come upon him again. He was very much interested in Marguerite after this, Theo thought; but it is very much to be doubted whether he could have given a clear account of what was passing before his eyes upon the stage. He did not even go into the house with them when they returned; but as he stood upon the door-step, touching his hat in a final adieu, he was keenly alive to a consciousness of Theodora North at the head of the stair-case, with billows of glistening rose-pink satin lying on the rich carpet about her feet, as she half turned toward him

to bid him good-night.

Bright as the future was, it left a sense of discomfort, he could not explain why. He dismissed the carriage, and walked down the street, feeling fairly depressed in spirits.

He had, perhaps, never given the girl a thought before, unless when chance had thrown them together, and even then his thoughts had been common admiring ones. She had pleased him, and he had tried to amuse her in a careless, well-meant fashion, though he had never made fine speeches to her, as nine men out of ten would have done. He had been so used to Priscilla, that it never occurred to him that a girl so young as this one could be a woman. And, after all, his blindness had not been the result of any frivolous lack of thought. A sharp experience had made him as thoroughly a man of the world as a man may be; but it had not made him callous or indifferent to the beauties of life. No one would ever have called him emotional, or prone to enthusiasms of a weak kind, and yet he was by no means hard of heart. He had quiet fancies of his own about people and things, and many of these reticent, rarely-expressed ideas were reverent, chivalrous ones of women. The opposing force of a whole world could never have shaken his faith in Priscilla Gower, or touched his respect for her; but though, perhaps, he had never understood it so, he had never felt very enthusiastically concerning her. Truly, Priscilla Gower and enthusiasm were not in accordance with each other. Chance had thrown them together when both

were very young, and propinquity did the rest. Propinquity is the strongest of agents in a love affair, and in Denis Oglethorpe's love affair, propinquity had accomplished what nothing else would have been likely to have done. The desperate young scribbler of twenty years had been the lodger of the elder Miss Gower, and Priscilla, aged seventeen, had brought in his frugal dinners to him, and receipted his modest bills on their weekly payment.

Priscilla at seventeen, silent, practical, grave and handsome, had, perhaps, softened unconsciously at the sight of his often pale face--he worked so hard and so far into the night; when at length they became friends, Priscilla gravely, and without any hesitation, volunteered to help him. She could copy well and clearly, and he could come into her aunt's room--it would save fires. So she helped him calmly and decorously, bending her almost austerely-handsome young head over his papers for hours on the long winter nights. It is easy to guess how the matter terminated. If ever he won success he determined to give it to Priscilla--and so he told her. He had never wavered in his faith for a second since, though he had encountered many beautiful and womanly women. He had worked steadily for her sake, and shielded her from every care that it lay within his power to lighten. He was not old Miss Elizabeth Gower's lodger now--he was her niece's husband in perspective. He was to marry Priscilla Gower in eight months. This was why Theodora North, in glistening rose-pink satin, sent him home confronting a suddenly-raised spirit of pain. Twice, in one night, he had found himself feeling toward Theodora North as he had never felt toward

Priscilla Gower in his life. Twice, in one night, he had turned his eyes upon this girl of sixteen, and suffered a sudden shock of enthusiasm, or something like it. He was startled and discomfited. She had no right to win such admiration from him--he had no right to give it.

But as his walk in the night-air cooled him, it cooled his ardor of self-examination somewhat. His discontent was modified by the time he reached his own door, and took his latch-key out of his pocket. The face that had looked down upon him beneath the light at the head of the stair-case, had faded into less striking color--it was only a girl's face again. He was on better terms with himself, and his weakness seemed less formidable.

"I will keep my promise to-morrow," he said, "and Priscilla shall go with us. Poor Priscilla!--poor girl! Rose-pink satin would scarcely be in good taste in Broome street."

The promise he had made was nothing more than a ratification of the old one. They were to see the lions together, and Priscilla was to guide them.

And when the morrow came, he found it, after all, safe enough, and an easy enough matter, to tuck Theodora's small, gloved hand under his arm, when they set out on their tour of investigation and discovery. The girl was pretty enough, too, in her soft, black merino--her "best" dress in Downport--but she was not dazzling. The little round, black-plumed hat

was becoming also; but in his now more prosaic mood, he could stand that, too, pretty as it was in an innocent, unconsciously-coquettish way. Theo was never coquettish herself in the slightest degree. She was not world-wise enough for that yet. But she was quite exhilarating to-day; so glad to be out even in the London fog of November; so glad to be taken lion-hunting; so delighted with the shops and their gay windows; so ready to let her young tongue run on in a gay stream of chatter, altogether so bright, and pretty, and joyous, that her escort was fain to be delighted too.

"Guess where we are going to first?" said he. (He had not before openly spoken of Priscilla to her.)

She glanced up into his face, brightly. She remembered what he had told her about his lady friend.

"I don't exactly know the name of the place," she said; "but I think I know the name of the person we are going to see."

"Do you?" was his reply. "Then say it to me--let me hear it."

"Miss Gower," she answered, softly, in a pretty reverence for him. "Miss Priscilla Gower."

He nodded, slightly, with a curious mixture of expressions in his face.

"Yes," he said. "Miss Gower, or rather Miss Priscilla Gower, as you say. Number twenty-three, Broome street; and Broome street is not a fashionable locality, my dear Theodora."

"Isn't it?" queried Theo. "Why not?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Ask Lady Throckmorton," he said. "But do you know who Miss Priscilla Gower is, Theodora?"

Her bright eyes crept up to his, half-timidly; but she said nothing, so he continued.

"Miss Priscilla Gower is the young lady to whom I am to be married next July. Did you know that?"

"Yes," answered Theo, looking actually pleased, and blushing beautifully as he looked down at her. "But I am very much obliged to you for telling me, Mr. Oglethorpe."

"Why?" he asked. It was very preposterous, that even though his mood was so prosaic and paternal a one, he was absurdly, vacantly sensible of feeling some uneasiness at the brightness of her upturned face. For pity's sake, why was it that he was impelled to such a puerile weakness--such a vanity, as he sternly called it.

"Because," returned Theo, "it makes me feel as if--I mean it makes me happy to think you trust me enough to tell me about what has made you happy. I hope--oh! I do hope Miss Priscilla Gower will like me."

He had been looking straight before him while she spoke, but this brought his eyes to hers again, and to her face--bright, appealing, upturned--and he found himself absolutely obliged to steady himself with a jesting speech.

"My dearest Theodora," he said. "Miss Priscilla Gower could not possibly help it."

Comforting as this assurance was to her, it must be confessed she found herself somewhat over-awed on reaching Broome street, and being taken into the tiny, dwarfed-looking parlor of number twenty-three; Miss Elizabeth Gower herself was there, in her company-cap, and long-cherished company-dress of snuff-colored satin. There were not many shades of difference in either her snuff-colored gown, or her snuff-colored skin, or her neat, snuff-colored false-front, Theo fancied, but she was not at all afraid of her. She was a trifle afraid of Miss Priscilla. Miss Priscilla was sitting at the table reading when they entered, and as she rose to greet them, holding her book in one hand, the thought entered Theo's mind that she could comprehend dimly why Lady Throckmorton disliked her, and thought her unsuited to Denis Oglethorpe. There was an absence of anything girl-like in her fine,

ivory-pale face, somehow, though it was a young face and a handsome face, at whose fine lines and clear contour even a connoisseur could not have caviled. Its long almond-shaped, agate-gray eyes, black-fringed and lustrous as they were, still were silent eyes--they did not speak even to Denis Oglethorpe.

"I am glad you have come," she said, simply, extending her hand in acknowledgment of Denis's introduction. The quietness of this greeting speech was a fair sample of all her manner. It would have been sheerly impossible to expect anything like effusiveness from Priscilla Gower. The most sanguine and empty-headed of mortals would never have looked for it in her. She was constitutionally unenthusiastic, if such a thing may be.

But she was gravely curious in this case concerning Theodora North. The fact that Denis had spoken of her admiringly was sufficient to arouse in her mind an interest in this young creature, who was at once, and so inconsistently, beautiful, timid, and regal, without consciousness.

"Three years more will make her something wonderful, as far as beauty is concerned," he had said; and, accordingly, she had felt some slight pleasure in the anticipation of seeing her.

Yet Theo had some faint misgivings during the day as to whether Miss Priscilla Gower would like her or not. She was at first even inclined to fear that she would not, being so very handsome, and grave, and womanly.

But toward the end of their journeying together, she felt more hopeful. Reticent as she was, Priscilla Gower was a very charming young person. She talked well, and with much clear, calm sense; she laughed musically when she laughed at all, and could make very telling, caustic speeches when occasion required; but still it was singular what a wide difference the difference of six years made in the two girls. As Lady Throckmorton had said, it was not a matter of age. At twenty-two Theodora North would overflow with youth as joyously as she did now at seventeen; at seventeen Priscilla Gower had assisted her maiden aunt's lodger to copy his manuscript with as mature a gravity as she would have displayed to-day.

"I hope," said Theodora, when, after their sight-seeing was over, she stood on the pavement before the door in Broome street, her nice little hand on Denis Oglethorpe's arm, "I hope you will let me come to see you again, Miss Gower."

Priscilla, standing upon the door-step, smiled down on her blooming girl's face, a smile that was a little like moonlight. All Priscilla's smiles were like moonlight. Theo's had a delicious glow of the sun.

"Yes," she said, in her practical manner. "It will please me very much to see you, Miss Theodora. Come as often as you can spare the time."

She watched the two as they walked down the street together, Theo's black feather glossy in the gaslight, as it drooped its long end against

Oglethorpe's coat, and as she watched them, she noticed even this trifle of the feather, and the trifling fact that though Theo was almost regal in girlish height, she was not much taller than her companion's shoulder. It was strange, she thought afterward, that she should have done so; but even while thinking it strange in the afterward that came to her, she remembered it all as distinctly as ever, and knew that to the last day of her life she would never quite forget the quiet of the narrow, dreary street, the yellow light of the gas-lamps, and the two figures walking away into the shadow, with their backs toward her, the girl holding Denis Oglethorpe's arm, and the glossy feather in her black hat drooping its tip upon his shoulder.