

CHAPTER V.

THE SEPARATION.

"Mr. Denis Oglethorpe has gone away. He will not come back again until July, when he is to marry Miss Gower."

This was the last entry recorded in the little pink-and-gold journal, and after it came a gap of months.

It was midnight after the memorable day spent in Broome street that the record was made, and having made it, Theodora North shut the book with a startled feeling that she had shut within its pages an unfinished page of her life.

It was a strange feeling to have come upon her so suddenly, and there was a strange kind of desperateness in its startling strength. It was startling; it had come upon her without a moment's warning, it seemed, and yet, if she had been conscious of it, there had been warning enough. Warning enough for an older woman--warning enough for Denis Oglethorpe; but it had not seemed warning to a girl of scarcely seventeen years. But she understood it now; she had understood it the moment he told her in that strained, steady voice that he was going away. She had delivered his message to Lady Throckmorton, and listened quietly to her wandering comments, answering them as best she could. She had waited patiently

until Sir Dugald's barbarous eleven o'clock supper was over, and then she had gone to her room, stirred the fire, and dropped down upon the hearth-rug to think it over. She thought over it for a long time, her handsome eyes brooding over the red coals, but after about half an hour she spoke out aloud to the silence of the room.

"He loved me," she said. "He loved me--me. Poor Priscilla! Ah, poor Priscilla! How sorry I am for you."

She was far more sorry for Priscilla than she was for herself, though it was Priscilla who had won the lover, and herself who had lost him forever. She cared for him so much more deeply than she realized as yet, that she would rather lose him, knowing he loved her, than win him feeling uncertain. The glow in her eyes died away in tears, but she was too young to realize despair or anything like it. The truth was that the curious enchantment of the day had not been altogether sad, and at seventeen one does not comprehend that fate can be wholly bitter, or that some turn in fortune is not in store for the future, however hopeless the present may seem.

In this mood the entry was made in the little journal, and having made it, Theodora North cried a little, hoped a little, and wondered guilelessly how matters could end with perfect justice to Priscilla Gower.

The household seemed rather quiet after the change. Mr. Denis Oglethorpe

was a man to be missed under any circumstances--and Theo was not the only one who missed him. Lady Throckmorton missed him also, but she had the solace of her novels and her chocolate, which Theo had not. Novels had been delightful at Downport, when they were read in hourly fear of the tasks that always interfered to prevent any indulgence; but in those days, for some reason, they were not as satisfactory as they appeared once, and so being thrown on her own resources, she succumbed to the very natural girlish weakness of feeling a sort of fascination for Broome street. It was hard to resist Broome street, knowing that there must be news to be heard there, and so she gradually fell into the habit of paying visits, more to Miss Elizabeth Gower than to her niece. The elder Miss Gower was always communicative, and always ready to talk about her favorites, and to Theo, in her half-puzzled, half-sad frame of mind, this was a curious consolation. The two spent hours together, sometimes, in the tiny parlor, stumbling over Berlin wool difficulties, and now and then wandering to and fro, conversationally, from Priscilla to the octagon-stitch, and from the octagon-stitch to Denis.

Priscilla was prone to reserve, and rarely joined them in their talks; and, besides, she was so often busy, that if she had felt the inclination to do so, she had not time to indulge it. But she was even more silent than she had seemed at first, Theo thought, and she was sure her pale, handsome face was paler, though, of course, that was easily to be accounted for by her lover's absence.

She was a singular girl this Priscilla Gower. The first time Theo ever

saw her display an interest in anybody, or in anything, was when she first heard Pamela's love-story mentioned.

She was sitting at work near them, when Theo chanced to mention Arthur Brunwalde, and, to her surprise, Priscilla looked up from her desk immediately.

"He was your sister's lover, was he not?" she said, with an abrupt interest in the subject.

"Yes," answered Theo; "but he died, you know."

Priscilla nodded.

"The week before their wedding-day," she said. "Mr. Oglethorpe told me so."

Theo answered in the affirmative again.

"And poor Pam could not forget him," she added, her usual tender reverence for poor Pam showing itself in her sorrowing voice. "She was very pretty then, and Lady Throckmorton was angry because she would not marry anybody else; but Pamela never cared for anybody else."

Priscilla got up from her chair, and, coming to the hearth, leaned against the low mantel, pen in hand. She looked down on Theodora North

with a curious expression in her cold, handsome eyes.

"Is your sister like you?" she asked.

Her tone was such a strange one that Theo lifted her face with a faint, startled look.

"No," she replied, almost timidly. "Pamela is fairer than I am, and not so tall. We are not alike at all."

"I was not thinking of that," said Priscilla. "I was wondering if you were alike in disposition. I think I was wondering most whether you would be as faithful as Pamela."

"That is a strange question," Miss Elizabeth interposed. "Theodora has not been tried."

But Priscilla was looking straight at Theo's downcast eyes.

"But I think Theodora knows," she said, briefly. "Are you like your sister in that, Theodora? I remember hearing Mr. Oglethorpe say once you would be."

Theo dropped her ivory crochet-needle, and bent to pick it up, with a blurred vision and nervous fingers.

"I cannot tell," she said. "I am not old enough to know yet."

"You are seventeen," said Priscilla. "I knew at seventeen."

Theo recovered the needle, and reset it in her work to give herself time, and then she looked up and faced her questioner bravely, in a sort of desperateness.

"If I knew that I loved any one. If I had ever loved any one as Pamela loved Mr. Brunwalde, I should be like Pamela," she said. "I should never love any one else."

From that time she fancied that Priscilla Gower liked her better than she had done before; at any rate, she took more notice of her, though she was never effusive, of course.

She talked to her oftener, and seemed to listen while she talked, even though she was busy at the time. She said to her once that she would like to know Pamela; and, emboldened by this, Theo ventured to bring one of Pam's letters to read to her; and when she had read it, told the whole story of her sister's generosity in a little burst of enthusiastic love and gratitude that fairly melted tender-hearted old Miss Elizabeth to tears, and caused her to confide afterward to Theo the fact that she herself had felt the influence of the tender passion, in consequence of the blandishments of a single gentleman of uncertain age, whose performances upon the flute had been the means of winning her

affections, but had unhappily resulted in his contracting a fatal cold while serenading on a damp evening.

"He used to play 'In a Cottage near a Wood,' my dear, most beautifully," said Miss Elizabeth, wild with pathos, "though I regret to say that, as we did not live in a musical neighborhood, the people next door did not appreciate it; the gentleman of the house even going so far as to say that he was not sorry when he died, as he did a few weeks after the cold settled on his dear weak lungs. He was the only lover I ever had, my dear Theodora, and his name was Elderberry, a very singular name, by the way, but he was a very talented man."

When Theo went into the little back bedroom that evening to put on her hat, Priscilla Gower went with her, and, as she stood before the dressing-table buttoning her sacque, she was somewhat puzzled by the expression on her companion's face. Priscilla had taken up her muff, and was stroking the white fur, her eyes downcast upon her hand as it moved to and fro, the ring upon its forefinger shining in the gaslight.

"I had a letter from Mr. Oglethorpe yesterday," Priscilla said, at last.

"He is in Vienna now; he asked if you were well. To-night I shall answer him. Have you any message to send?"

"I?" said Theo. It seemed to her so strange a thing for Miss Priscilla Gower to say, that her pronoun was almost an interjection.

"I thought, perhaps," said Priscilla, quietly, "that a message from you would gratify him, if you had one to send."

Theo took up her gloves and began to draw them on, a sudden feeling of pain or discomfort striking her. It was a feeling scarcely defined enough to allow her to decide whether it was real pain or only discomfort.

"I do not think I have any message to send," she replied. "Thank you, Miss Priscilla."

She took her muff then, and went back to the parlor to kiss Miss Elizabeth, in a strange frame of mind. She was beginning to feel more strangely concerning Mr. Denis Oglethorpe, and it was Priscilla Gower who had stirred her heart. She found Lady Throckmorton waiting at home for her, to her surprise, in a new mood. She had that evening received a letter from Denis herself, and it had suggested an idea to her.

"I have been thinking, Theo," she said, "that we might take a run over the Channel ourselves. I have not been in Paris for four years, and I believe the change would do me good. The last time I visited the Spas, my health improved greatly."

It was just like her ladyship to become suddenly possessed of a whim, and to follow its lead on the spur of the moment. She was a woman of caprices, and her caprices always ruled the day, as this one did, to

Theo's great astonishment. It seemed such a great undertaking to Theodora, this voyage of a few hours; but Lady Throckmorton regarded it as the lightest of matters. To her it was only the giving of a few orders, being uncomfortably sea-sick for a while, and then landing in Calais, with a waiting-woman who understood her business, and a man-servant who was accustomed to travelling. So when Theo broke into exclamations of pleasure and astonishment, she did not understand either her enthusiasm or her surprise.

"What," she said, "you like the idea, do you? Well, I think I have made up my mind about it. We could go next week, and I dare say we could reach Vienna before Denis Oglethorpe goes away."

Theo became suddenly silent. She gave vent to no further exclamations. She would almost have been willing to give up the pleasure of the journey after that. She was learning that it was best for her not to see Denis Oglethorpe again, and here it seemed that she must see him in spite of herself, even though she was conscientious enough to wish to do what was best, not so much because it was best for herself, as because it was just to Priscilla Gower. But Lady Throckmorton had come to a decision, and forthwith made her preparations. She even wrote to Vienna, and told Denis that they were coming, herself and Theodora North, and he must wait and meet them if possible.

It was a great trial to Theodora, this. She was actually girlish and sensitive enough to fancy that Mr. Denis Oglethorpe might imagine their

intention to follow him was some fault of hers, and she was uncomfortable and nervous accordingly. She hoped he would have left Vienna before the letter reached him; she hoped he might go away in spite of it; she hoped it might never reach him at all. And yet, in spite of this, she experienced an almost passionately keen sense of disappointment when, on the day before their departure, Lady Throckmorton received a letter from him regretting his inability to comply with her request, and announcing his immediate departure for some place whose name he did not mention. Business had called him away, and Lady Throckmorton, of course, knew what such business was, and how imperative its demands were.

"He might have waited," Theo said to herself, with an unexpected, inconsistent feeling of wretchedness. "I would have stayed anywhere to have seen him only for a minute. He had no need to be so ready to go away." And then she found herself burning all over, as it were, in her shame at discovering how bold her thoughts had been.

Perhaps this was the first time she really awoke to a full consciousness of where she had drifted. The current had carried her along so far, and she had not been to blame, because she had not comprehended her danger; but now it was different. She was awakening, but she was at the edge of the cataract, and its ominous sounds had alarmed her.