

CHAPTER VII.

"PARTING IS SWEET SORROW."

He did not go away. He could not yet. He stayed in Paris, day after day, even week after week, lingering through a man's very human weakness. He could no longer resist the knowledge of the fact that he had lost the best part of the battle; he had lost it in being compelled to acknowledge the presence of danger by flight; he had lost it completely after this by being forced to admit to himself that there was not much more to lose, that in spite of his determination, Theodora North had filled his whole life and nature as Priscilla Gower had never filled it, and could never fill it, were she his wife for a thousand years. He had made a mistake, and discovered having made it too late--that was all; but he blamed himself for having made it; blamed himself for being blind; blamed himself more than all for having discovered his blindness and his blunder. Thinking thus, he resolved to go away. Yes, he would go away! He would marry Priscilla at once, and have it over. He would put an impassable barrier between himself and Theo.

But, though he reproached himself, and anathematized himself, and resolved to go away, he did not leave Paris. He stayed in the face of his remorseful wretchedness. It was a terrible moral condition to be in, but he absolutely gave up, for the time, to the force of circumstances, and floated recklessly with the current.

If he had loved Theodora North when he left her for Priscilla's sake, he loved her ten thousand fold, when he forbore to leave her for her own. He loved her passionately, blindly, jealously. He envied every man who won a smile from her, even while his weakness angered him. She had changed greatly during their brief separation, but the change grew deeper after they had once again encountered each other. She was more conscious of herself, more fearful, less innocently frank. She did not reveal herself to him as she had once done. There is a stage of love in which frankness is at once unnatural and impossible, and she had reached this stage. Even her letters to Priscilla were not frank after his reappearance.

Since the night of their interview after their return from the theatre, he had not referred openly to his reasons for remaining. He had held himself to the letter of his bond so far, at least, though he was often sorely tempted. He visited Lady Throckmorton and Theo as he had visited them in London, and was their attendant cavalier upon most occasions, but beyond that he rarely transgressed. It was by no means a pleasant position for a man in love to occupy. The whole world was between him and his love, it seemed. The most infatuated of Theodora North's adorers did not fear him, handsome and popular as he was, dangerous rival as he might have appeared. Lady Throckmorton's world knew the history of their favorite, having learned it as society invariably learns such things. Most of them knew that his fate had been decided for years; all of them knew that his stay in Paris could not be a long one. A man whose

marriage is to be celebrated in June has not many months to lose between February and May.

But this did not add to the comfort of Denis Oglethorpe. The rest of Theo's admirers had a right to speak--he must be silent. The shallowest of them might ask a hearing--he dared not for his dishonored honor's sake. So even while nearest to her he stood afar off, as it were a witness to the innocent triumph of a girlish popularity that galled him intolerably. He puzzled her often in these days, and out of her bewilderment grew a vague unhappiness.

And yet, in spite of this, her life grew perilously sweet at times. Only a few months ago she had dreamed of such bliss as Jane Eyre's and Zulick's, wonderingly; but there were brief moments now and then when she believed in it faithfully. She was very unselfish in her girlish passion. She thought of nothing but the wondrous happiness love could bring to her. She would have given up all her new luxuries and triumphs for Denis Oglethorpe's sake. She would have gone back to Downport with him, to the old life; to the mending, and bread-and-butter cutting, and shabby dresses; she would have taken it all up again cheerfully, without thinking for one moment that she had made a sacrifice. Downport would have been a paradise with him. She was wonderfully devoid of calculation or worldly wisdom, if she had only been conscious of it. An absurdly loving, simple, impolitic young person was this Theodora of ours; but I, for one, must confess to feeling some weak sympathy for her very ignorance.

Among the many of the girl's admirers whom Denis Oglethorpe envied jealously, perhaps the one most jealously envied, was Victor Maurien. A jealous man might have feared him with reason under any circumstances, and Denis chafed at his good-fortune miserably. The man who had the honorable right to success could not fail to torture him.

"It would be an excellent match for Theo," was Lady Throckmorton's complacent comment on the subject of the attache's visit, and the comment was made to Denis himself. "M. Maurien is the very man to take good care of her; and besides that, he is, of course, desirable. Girls like Theo ought to marry young. Marriage is their forte; they are too dependent to be left to themselves. Theo is not like Pamela or your Priscilla Gower, for instance; queenly as Theo looks, she is the veriest strengthless baby on earth. It is a source of wonder to me where she got the regal air."

But, perhaps, Lady Throckmorton did not understand her lovely young relative fully. She did not take into consideration a certain mental ripening process which had gone on slowly but surely during the last few months. The time came when Theodora North began to comprehend her powers, and feel the change in herself sadly. Then it was that she ceased to be frank with Denis Oglethorpe, and began to feel a not fully-defined humiliation and remorse.

Coming in unexpectedly once, Denis found her sitting all alone, with

open book in her lap, and eyes brooding over the fire. He knew the volume well enough at sight; it was the half-forgotten, long-condemned collection of his youthful poems; and when she saw him, she shut it up, and laid her folded hands upon it, as if she did not wish him to recognize it.

He was in one of his most unhappy moods, for some reason or other, and so unreasonable was his frame of mind, that the movement, simple as it was, galled him bitterly.

"Will you tell me why you did that?" he asked, abruptly.

Her eyes fell upon the carpet at her feet, but she sat with her hands still clasped upon the half-concealed book, without answering him.

"You would not have done it three months ago," he said, almost wrathfully, "and the thing is not more worthless now than it was then, though it was worthless enough. Give it to me, and let me fling it into the fire."

She looked up at him all at once, and her eyes were full to the brim. Lady Throckmorton was right in one respect. She was strengthless enough sometimes. She was worse than strengthless against Denis Oglethorpe.

"Don't be angry with me," she said, almost humbly. "I don't think you could be angry with me if you knew how unhappy I am to-day." And the

tears that had brimmed upward fell upon the folded hands themselves.

"Why to-day?" he asked, softening with far more reason than he had been galled. "What has to-day brought, Theodora?"

She answered him with a soft little gasp, of a remorseful sob. "It has brought M. Maurien," she confessed.

"And sent him away again?" he added, in a low, unsteady voice.

She nodded; her simple, pathetic sorrowfulness showing itself even in the poor little gesture.

"He has been very fond of me for a long time," she said, tremulously.

"He says that he loves me. He came to ask me to be his wife. I am very sorry for him."

"Why?" he asked again, unsteadily.

"I was obliged to make him unhappy," she answered. "I do not love him."

"Why?" he repeated yet again; but his voice had sunk into a whisper.

"Because," she said, trembling all over now--"because I cannot."

He could not utter another word. There was such danger for him, and his

perilled honor, in her simple tremor and sadness, that he was forced to be silent.

It was not safe to follow M. Maurien at least. But, as might be anticipated, their conversation flagged in no slight degree. The hearts of both were so full of one subject that it would have been hard to force them to another. Theo, upon her low sultane, sat mute with drooped eyes, becoming more silent every moment. Oglethorpe, in regarding her beautiful downcast face, forgot himself also. It was almost half an hour before he remembered he had not made the visit without an object. He had something to say to her--something he had once said to her before. He was going away again, and had come to tell her so. But he recollected himself at last.

"I must not forget that I had a purpose in coming here to-night," he said.

"A purpose?" she repeated, after him.

"Yes," he answered. "I found last night, on returning to my hotel, that there was a letter awaiting me from London--from my employers, in fact. I must leave Paris to-morrow morning."

"And will you not come back again?" she added, breathlessly almost. The news was so sudden that it made her breathless. This was the last time--the very last!

They might never see each other again in this world, and if they did ever chance to meet, Priscilla Gower would be his wife. And yet he was standing there now, only a few feet from her, so near that her outstretched hand would touch him. The full depth of misery in the thought flashed upon her all at once, and drove the blood back to her heart.

"Why?" she gasped out unconsciously, through the very strength of her pangs. "You are going away forever."

She scarcely knew that she had uttered the words until she saw how deathly pale he grew. The beads of moisture started out upon his forehead, and his nervous hand went up to brush them away.

"Not forever, I trust," he said, huskily. "Only until--until--"

"Until July," she ended for him; "until you are married to Miss Priscilla Gower."

She held up one little, trembling, dusky hand, and actually began to tell the intervening months off her fingers. She was trying so hard to calm herself that she did not think what she was doing. She only knew she must do or say something.

"How many months will it be?" she said. "It is February now; March,

April, May, June, July. Five months--not quite five, perhaps. We may not be here then. Lady Throckmorton intends to visit the Spas during the summer."

From the depths of her heart she was praying that some chance might take them away from Paris before he returned. It would be his bridal tour--Priscilla's bridal tour. Ah, if some wildly happy dream had only chanced to make it her bridal tour, and she could have gone with him as Priscilla would, from place to place; near him all the time, loving and trusting him always, depending on him, obedient to his lightest wishes. Miss Priscilla was far too self-restrained to ever be as foolishly, thrillingly tender and fond, and happy as she, Theodora North, would have been. She could have given a little sob of despair and pain as she thought of it.

As it was, the hopeless, foolish tears rose up to her large eyes, and made them liquid and soft; and when they rose, Denis Oglethorpe saw them. Such beautiful eyes as they were; such ignorant, believing, fawn-like eyes. The eyes alone would have unmanned him--under the tears he broke down utterly, and so was left without a shadow of control.

He crossed the hearth with a stride and stood close to her, his whole face ablaze with the fierceness of his remorseful self-reproach and the power of his love.

"Listen to me, Theo," he said. "Let me confess to you; let me tell you

the truth for once. I am a coward and a villain. I was a villain to ask a woman I did not truly love to be my wife. I am a coward to shrink from the result of my vanity and madness. She is better than I am--this woman who has promised herself to me; she is stronger, truer, purer; she has loved me, she has been faithful to me; and God knows I honor and revere her. I am not worthy to kiss the ground her feet have trodden upon. I was vain fool enough to think I could make her happy by giving to her all she did not ask for--my life, my work, my strength--not remembering that Heaven had given her the sacred right to more. She has held to our bond for years, and now see how it has ended! I stand here before you to-night, loving you, adoring you, worshipping you, and knowing myself a dishonored man, a weak, proved coward, whose truth is lost forever.

"I do not ask you for a word. I do not say a word further. I will not perjure myself more deeply. I only say this as a farewell confession. It will be farewell; we shall never see each other again on earth perhaps; and if we do, an impassable gulf will lie between us. I shall go back to England and hasten the marriage if I can; and then, if a whole life's strenuous exertions and constant care and tenderness will wipe out the dishonor my weakness has betrayed me into, it shall be wiped out. I do not say one word of love to you, because I dare not. I only say, forgive me, forget me, and good-by."

She had listened to him with a terrified light growing in her eyes; but when he finished she got up from her seat, shivering from head to foot.

"Good-by," she said, and let him take her cold, lithe, trembling hands. But the moment he touched them, his suppressed excitement and her own half-comprehended pain seemed to frighten her, and she began to try to draw them from his grasp.

"Go away, please," she said, with a wild little sob. "I can't bear it. I don't want to be wicked, and perhaps I have been wicked, too. Miss Gower is better than I am--more worth loving. Oh, try to love her, and--and--only go away now, and let me be alone."

She ended in an actual little moan. She was shivering and sobbing, hard as she tried to govern herself. And yet, though this man loved her, and would have given half his life to snatch her to his arms and rain kisses of comfort upon her, he let the cold little hand drop, and in a moment more had left her.