

CHAPTER VIII.

THEO'S FIRST TROUBLE.

He had been gone three days, and, in their lapse, Theo felt as if three lustrums had passed. Their parting had been so unexpected a one, that she could not get used to it, or believe it was anything else but a painful dream. After all, it seemed that Fortune was crueller than she had imagined possible. He was gone, and to Priscilla Gower; and she had never been able to believe that some alteration, of which she had no very definite conception, would occur, and end her innocent little ghost of a love-story, as all love-stories should be ended. It had never been more than the ghost of a story. Until that last night he had never uttered a word of love to her; he had never even made the fine speeches to her which she might have expected, and, doubtless, would have expected, if she had been anybody else but Theodora North. She had not expected them, though, and, consequently, was not disappointed when she did not receive them. But she found herself feeling terribly lonely after Denis Oglethorpe left Paris. The first day she felt more stunned than anything else. The second her sensibilities began to revive keenly, and she was full of sad, desperate wonder concerning him--concerning how he would feel when he stood face to face with Priscilla Gower; how he would look, what he would say to her. The third day was only the second intensified, and filled with a something that was almost like a terror now and then.

It was upon this third day that Lady Throckmorton was unexpectedly called away. A long-lost friend of her young days had suddenly made her appearance at Rouen, and having, by chance, heard of her ladyship's presence in Paris, had written to her a letter of invitation, which the ties of their girlhood rendered almost a command. So to Rouen her ladyship went, for once leaving Theo behind. Madam St. Etunne was an invalid, and the visit could not be a very interesting one to a young girl. This was one reason why she was left--the other was the more important one, that she did not wish to go, and made her wishes known. She was not sorry for the chance of being left to herself for a few days--it would be only a few days at most.

"Besides," said Lady Throckmorton, looking at her a trifle curiously, "you do not look well yourself. Theo, you look feverish, or nervous, or something of the kind. How was it I did not notice it before? You must have caught cold. Yes, I believe I must leave you here."

Consequently, Theo was left. She was quiet enough, too, when her ladyship had taken her departure. It was generally supposed that Miss North had accompanied her chaperon, and so she had very few callers. She spent the greater part of her time in the apartment in which Denis Oglethorpe had bidden her farewell, and, as may be easily imagined, it did not add to her lightness of spirit to sit in her old seat and ponder over the past in the silence of the deserted room. She arose from her ottoman one night, and walked to one of the great mirrors that extended

from floor to ceiling. She saw herself in it as she advanced--a regal-like young figure, with a head set like a queen's, speechful dark eyes, and glowing lips; a face that was half child's, half woman's, and yet wholly perfect in its fresh young life and beauty. Seeing this reflection, she stopped and looked at it, in a swift recognition of a new thought.

"Oh, Pam!" she cried out, piteously. "Oh, my poor, darling, faded Pam. You were pretty once, too, very dear, pretty and young. And you were happier than I can be, for Arthur only died. Nobody came between your love and you--nobody ever could. He died, but he was yours, Pam, and you were his."

She cried piteously and passionately when she went back to her seat, rested her arm upon a lounging-chair near her, and hid her face upon it, crying as only a girl can, with an innocent grief that had a pathos of its own. She was so lovely and remorseful. It seemed to her that some fault must have been hers, and she blamed herself that even now she could not wish that she had never met the man whose love for her was a dishonor to himself. Where was he now? He had told Lady Throckmorton that business would call him to several smaller towns on his way, so he might not be very far from Paris yet. She was thinking of this when at last she fell asleep, sitting by the fire, still resting her hand upon the chair by her side. It was by no means unnatural, though by no means poetic, that her girl's pain should end so.

But when the time-piece on the mantle chimed twelve with its silver tongue, she found herself suddenly and unaccountably wide awake. She sat up and looked about her. It was not the clock's chime that had awakened her she thought. It must have been, something more, she was so very wide awake indeed, and her senses were so clear. One minute later she found out what it was. There was some slight confusion down-stairs; a door was opened and closed, and she heard the sound of voices in the entrance-hall. She turned her head, and listening attentively, discovered that some one was coming up to the room in which she sat. The door opened, and upon the threshold stood a servant bearing in his hand a salver, and upon the salver a queer, official-looking document, such as she did not remember ever having seen before.

"A telegram," he said, rapidly in French, "for milady. They had thought it better to acquaint Mad'moiselle."

She took it from him, and opened it slowly and mechanically. She read it mechanically also--read it twice before she comprehended its full meaning, so great was the shock it gave her. Then she started from her seat with a cry that made the servant start also.

"Send Splaughton to me," she said, "this minute, without a moment's delay."

For the telegram she had just read told her that in a wayside inn, at St. Quentin, Denis Oglethorpe lay dying, or so near it that the medical

man had thought it his duty to send for the only friend who was on the right side of Calais, and that friend, whose name he had discovered by chance, was Lady Throckmorton.

It was, of course, a terribly unwise thing that Theodora North decided upon doing an hour later. Only such a girl as she was, or as her life had necessarily made her, would have hit upon a plan so loving, so wild and indiscreet. But it did not occur to her, even for a second, that there was any other thing to do. She must go to him herself in Lady Throckmorton's stead; she must take Splaughton with her, and go try to take care of him until Lady Throckmorton came, or could send for Priscilla Gower and Miss Elizabeth.

"Ma'mselle," began the stricken Splaughton, when, as she stood before the erect young figure and desperate young face, this desperate plan was hurriedly revealed to her. "Ma'mselle, you forget the imprudence--"

But Theo stopped her, quite ignorant of the fact, that by doing so, she forfeited her reputation in Splaughton's eyes forever.

"He is going to die!" she said, with a wild little sob in her voice.

"And he is all alone-and--and he was to have been married, Splaughton, in July--only a few months from now. Oh, poor Priscilla Gower! Oh, poor girl! We must save him. I must go now and try to save him for her. Oh, if I could just have Pamela with me."

The woman saw at once that remonstrance would be worse than useless. Theo was slowly revealing to her that this despairing, terrified young creature would not understand her resistance in the slightest degree. She would not comprehend what it meant; so, while Splaighon packed up a few necessary articles, Theo superintended her, following her from place to place, with a longing impatience that showed itself in every word and gesture. She did not dare to do more, poor child. She had never overcome her secret awe of her waiting-woman. In her inexperienced respect for her, she even apologized pathetically and appealingly for the liberty she was taking in calling upon her.

"I am sorry to trouble you," she said, humbly, and feeling terribly homesick as she said it; "but I could not go alone, you know--and I must go. There is a lace collar in that little box that you may have, Splaighon. It is a pretty collar, and I will give you the satin bow that is fastened to it."

Scarcely two hours later they were on their way to St. Quentin. It never occurred to Theo, in the midst of her fright and unhappiness, that she was now doing a very unwise and dangerous thing. She only thought of one thing, that Denis was going to die. She loved him too much to think of herself at all, and, besides, she did not, poor innocent, know anything about such things.

It was a wonderful trial of the little old French doctor's calmness of mind, when, on his next visit to his patient, he found himself

confronted by a tall, young creature, with a pale, desperate face, and lovely tear-fraught eyes, instead of by the majestic, elderly person, the perusal of Lady Throckmorton's last letter to Denis had led him to expect. It was in the little inn parlor that he first encountered Theodora North, when she arrived, and on seeing her he gazed over his spectacles, first at herself, and then at the respectable Splaughton, in a maze of bewilderment, at seemingly having made so strange a blunder.

"Lady Throckmorton?" he said, at last, in English, or in a broken attempt at it. "Oh! Oui--I understand. The sister of monsieur? Ah, milady?"

Theo broke in upon him in a passionate impulse of fear and grief.

"No," she said. "I am not Lady Throckmorton. I am only her niece, Theodora North. My aunt was away when your telegram arrived, and--and I knew some one must come--so I came myself. Splaughton and I can take care of Mr. Oglethorpe. Oh, monsieur, is it true that he is dying?--will he never get well? How could it happen? He was so strong only a few days since. He must not die. It cannot be true that he will die--he has so many friends who love him."

Monsieur, the doctor, softened perceptibly under this; she was so young and innocent-looking, this girlish little English mademoiselle. Monsieur up-stairs must be a lucky man to have won her tender young heart so utterly. Strange and equivocal a thing as the pretty child (she seemed a

child to him) was doing, he never for an instant doubted the ignorant faith and love that shone in the depths of her beautiful agonized eyes. He bowed to her as deferentially as to a sultana, when he made his answer.

"It had been an accident," he commenced. "The stage had overturned on its way, and monsieur being in it, had been thrown out by its falling into a gully. His collar-bone had been broken, and several of his ribs fractured; but the worst of his injuries had been a gash on his head--a sharp stone had done it. Mademoiselle would understand wherein the danger lay. He was unconscious at present."

This he told her on their way to the chamber up-stairs; but even the gravity of his manner did not prepare her for the sight the opening of the door revealed to her. Handsome Denis Oglethorpe lay upon the narrow little bed with the face of a dying man, which is far worse than that of a dead man. There were spots of blood on his pillow and upon his garments; he was bandaged from head to foot, it seemed, with ghastly red, wet bandages; his eyes were glazed, and his jaw half dropped.

A low, wild cry broke from the pale lips of the figure in the door-way, and the next instant Theodora North had flown to the bedside and dropped upon her knees by it, hiding her deathly-stricken young face upon her lover's lifeless hand, forgetting Splaughton, forgetting the doctor, forgetting even Priscilla Gower, forgetting all but that she, in this moment, knew that she could not give him up, even to the undivided quiet

of death.

"He will die! He will die!" she cried out. "And I never told him. Oh, my love! love! Oh, my dearest, dear!"

The little, old doctor drew back, half way, through a suddenly stranger impulse of sympathy. He was uneasily conscious of the fact, that the staid, elderly person at his side was startled and outraged simultaneously by this passionate burst of grief on the part of her young mistress. He had seen so many of these unprepossessing English waiting-women that he understood the state of her feelings as by instinct. He turned to her with all the blandness possible under the circumstances, and gave her an order which would call for her presence down-stairs.

When she departed, as she did in a state bordering on petrification, he came forward to the bedside. He did not speak, however; merely looking down at his patient in a silence whose delicacy was worthy of honor, even in a shrivelled little snuff-taking, French, village doctor. The pretty young mademoiselle would be calmer before many minutes had elapsed--his experience had taught him. And so she was. At least, her first shock of terror wore away, and she was calm enough to speak to him. She lifted her face from the motionless hand, and looked up at him in a wild appeal for help, that was more than touching.

"Don't say he will die!" she prayed. "Oh, monsieur, only save him, and

he will bless you forever. I will nurse him so well. Only give me something to do, and see how faithful I shall prove. I shall never forget anything, and I shall never be tired--if--if he can only live, monsieur," the terrified catching of her breath making every little pause almost a sob.

"My child," he answered her, with a grave touch of something quite like affection in his air. "My child, I shall save him, if he is to be saved, and you shall help me."

How faithfully she held to the very letter of her promises, only this little, shrivelled village doctor could say. How tender, and watchful, and loving she was, in her care of her charge, only he could bear witness. She was never tired--never forgetful. She held to her place in the poor little bedroom, day and night, with an intensity of zeal that was actually astonishing. Priscilla Gower and Pamela North might have been more calm--certainly would have been more self-possessed, but they could not have been more faithful. She obeyed every order given to her like a child. She sat by the bedside, hour after hour, day and night, watching every change of symptom, noting every slight alteration of color, or pulse.

The friendship between herself and monsieur, the doctor, so strengthened that the confidence between them was unlimited. She was only disobedient in one thing. She would not leave her place either for food or rest. She ate her poor little dinners near her patient, and, if the truth had been

known, scarcely slept at all for the first two or three days.

"I could not sleep, you know," she said to the doctor, her great pathetic eyes filling with tears. "Please let me stay until Lady Throckmorton comes, at least."

So she stayed, and watched, and waited, quite alone, for nearly a week. But it seemed a much longer time to her. The poor, handsome face changed so often in even those few days, and her passions of despair and hope were so often changed with it. She never thought of Priscilla Gower. Her love and fear were too strong to allow of her giving a thought to anything on earth but Denis Oglethorpe. Perhaps her only consolation had something of guilt in it; but it was so poor and desperate a comfort, this wretched one of hearing him speak to and of her in his fever and delirium.

"My poor, handsome Theo," he would say. "Why, my beauty, there are tears in your eyes. What a scoundrel I am, if I have brought them there. What! the rose-colored satin again, my darling! Don't wear the rose-colored satin, Theo. It hurts my eyes. For God's sake, Priscilla, forgive me!"

And yet, even while they added to her terror, these poor ravings were some vague comfort, since they told her that he loved her. More than once her friend the doctor entered the room, and found her kneeling by the bedside, holding the unresponsive hand, with a white face and wide, tearless eyes; and seeing her thus, he read clearly that his pretty,

inexperienced protege had more at stake than he had even at first fancied.

It was about six days after Theodora North had arrived at St. Quentin, when, sitting at her post one morning, she heard the lumbering stage stop before the inn door. She rose and went to the window, half mechanically, half anxiously. She had been expecting Lady Throckmorton, for so long a time, that it seemed almost impossible that it could be she. But strangers had evidently alighted. There was a bustle of servants below, and one of them was carrying a leathern trunk into the house immediately under her window. It was a leathern trunk, rather shabby than otherwise, and on its side was an old label, which, being turned toward her, she could read plainly. She read it, and gave a faint start. It bore, in dingy black letters, the word "Downport."

She had hardly time to turn round, before there was a summons at the door, and without waiting to be answered, Splaughton entered, looking at once decorous and injured.

"There are two ladies in the parlor, mademoiselle," she said (she always called Theo mademoiselle in these days), "two English ladies, who did not give their names. They asked for Miss North."

Theo looked at the woman, and turned pale. She did not know how or why her mother and Pamela should come down to this place, but she felt sure it was they who were awaiting her; and for the first time since she had

received the telegram, a shock of something like misgiving rushed upon her. Suppose, after all, she had not done right. Suppose she had done wrong, and they had heard of it, and came to reproach her, or worse still (poor child, it seemed worse still to her), to take her away--to make her leave her love to strangers. She began to tremble, and as she went out of the room, she looked back on the face upon the pillow, with a despairing fear that the look might be her last.

She hardly knew how she got down the narrow stair-case. She only knew that she went slowly, in a curious sort of hysterical excitement.

Then she was standing upon the mat at the parlor-door; then she had opened the door itself, and stood upon the threshold, looking in upon two figures just revealed to her in the shadow. One figure--yes, it was Pamela's; the other not her mother's. No, the figure of Priscilla Gower.

"Pamela!" she cried out. "Oh, Pam, don't blame me!"

She never knew how the sight of her standing before them, like a poor little ghost, with her white, appealing eyes, touched one of these two women to the heart.

There was something pathetic in her very figure--something indescribably so in her half-humble, half-fearing voice.

Pamela rose up from the horse-hair sofa, and went to her.

Each of the three faces was pale enough; but Pamela had the trouble of these two, as well as her own anxiousness in her eyes.

"Theo," she said to her, "what have you done? Don't you understand what a mad act you have been guilty of?"

But her voice was not as sharp as usual, and it even softened before she finished speaking. She made Theo sit down, and gave her a glass of water to steady her nervousness. She could not be angry even at such indiscretion as this--in the face of the tremulous hands and pleading eyes.

"Where was Lady Throckmorton?" she said. "What was she doing, to let you come alone?"

"She was away," put in Theo, faintly. "And the telegram said he was dying, Pam, and--I didn't come alone quite. I brought Splaughton with me."

"You had no right to come at all," said Pam, trying to speak with asperity, and failing miserably. "Mr. Oglethorpe is nothing to you. They should have sent for Miss Gower at once."

But the fact was the little doctor had searched in vain for the exact address of the lady whose letters he found in his patient's portmanteau,

when examining his papers to find some clue to the whereabouts of his friends, and it was by the merest chance that he had discovered it in the end from Theo's own lips, and so had secretly written to Broome street, in his great respect and admiration for this pretty young nurse, who was at once so youthful and indescribably innocent. In her trouble and anxious excitement, Theo had not once thought of doing so herself, until during the last two days, and now there was no necessity for the action.

"And Mr. Oglethorpe," interposed Miss Gower.

"He is up-stairs," Theo answered. "The doctor thinks that perhaps he may be saved by careful nursing. I did what I could," and she stopped with a curious click in her throat.

The simple sight of Priscilla Gower, with her calm, handsome face, and calm, handsome presence, set her so far away from him and she had seemed so near to him during the few last days--she felt so poor and weak through the contrast. And Pamela was right. She was nothing to him--he was nothing to her. This was his wife who had come to him now, and she--what was she?

She led them up-stairs to the sick-room, silently, and there left them. It had actually never occurred to her to ask herself how it was that the two were together. She was thinking only about Denis. She went to her

own little bedroom at the top of the house--such a poor, little bare place as it was, as poor and bare as only a bedroom in a miserable little French road-side inn can be--only the low, white bed in it, a chair or two, and a barren toilet-table standing near the deep window. This deep, square window was the only part of the room holding any attraction for Theo. From it she could look out along the road, where the lumbering stages made their daily appearance, and could see miles of fields behind the hedges, and watch the peasant women in their wooden sabots journeying on to the market towns. She flung herself down on the bare floor, in the recess formed by the window, and folded her arms upon its broad ledge. She looked out for a minute at the road, and the fields, and the hedges, and then gave vent to a single, sudden desperate sob. Nobody knew her pain--nobody would ever know it. Perhaps everything would end, and pass, and die away forever, and it would be her own pain to the end of her life. Even Denis himself would not know it. He had never asked her to tell him that she loved him, and if he died, he would die without having heard a word of love from her lips. What would they do with her now--Priscilla and Pamela? Make her go back to Paris, and leave him to them; and if he got well they might never meet again, and, perhaps, he would never learn who had watched by his bedside, when no one else on earth was near to try to save him.

She dropped her face upon her folded arms, sobbing in a great, uncontrollable burst of rebellion against her fate.

"No one cares for us, my darling, my angel, my love!" she cried. "They

would take me from you, if they could; but they shall not, my own. If it was wrong, how can I help it? And, oh! what does it matter, if all the world should be lost to me, if only you could be left? If I could only see your dear face once every day, and hear your voice, even if it was ever so far away, and you were not speaking to me at all."

She was so wearied with her watching and excitement, that her grief wore itself away into silence and exhausted quiet. She did not raise her head, but let it rest upon her arms as she knelt, and before many minutes had passed, her eyes closed with utter weariness.

She awoke with a start, half an hour later. Some one was standing near her. It had been twilight when she fell asleep, and now the room was so gray, that she could barely distinguish who it was. A soft, thick shawl had been dropped over her, evidently by the person in question. When Theo's eyes became accustomed to the shadows, she recognized the erect, slender figure and handsome head. It was Priscilla Gower, and Priscilla Gower was leaning against the window, and looking down at her fixedly.

"You were cold when I found you," were her first words, "and so I threw my shawl around you. You ought not to have gone to sleep there."

"I fell asleep before I knew that I was tired," said Theo. "Thank you, Miss Gower."

There was a pause of a moment, before she summoned courage to speak

again.

"I have not had time yet," she hesitated, at last, "to ask you how Miss Elizabeth is. I hope she is well?"

"I am sorry to say she is not," Priscilla replied. "If she had been well, she would have accompanied me here. She has been very weak of late. It was on that account that I applied to your sister when the doctor's letter told me I was needed."

"I have been expecting Lady Throckmorton for so long, that I am afraid something has gone wrong," said Theo.

To this remark, Priscilla made no reply. She was never prone to be communicative regarding Lady Throckmorton. But she had come here to say something to Theodora North, and at last she said it.

"You have been here--how long?" she asked, suddenly.

"Nearly a week," said Theo.

"Is Mr. Oglethorpe better, or worse, than when you saw him first?"

"I do not know exactly," answered the low, humble voice. "Sometimes better--though I do not think he is ever much worse."

Another pause, and then:

"You were very brave to come so far alone."

The beautiful, dark, inconsistently, un-English face was uplifted all at once, but the next moment it dropped with a sob of actual anguish.

"Oh, Miss Gower!" the girl cried. "Don't blame me; please don't blame me. There was no one else, and the telegram said he was dying."

"Hush," said Priscilla Gower, with an inexplicable softness in her tone.

"I don't blame you; I should have done the same thing in your place."

"But you--" began Theo, faintly.

Priscilla stopped her before she had time to finish her sentence; stopped her with a cold, clear, steady voice.

"No," she said. "You are making a mistake."

What this brief speech meant, she did not explain; but she evidently had understood what Theodora was going to say, and had not wished to hear it.

But brief speech as it was, its brevity held a swift pang of new fear for Theo. She could not quite comprehend its exact meaning, but it

struck a fresh dread to her heart. Could it be that she knew the truth, and was going to punish him? Could she be cruel enough to think of reproaching him at such an hour as this, when he lay at death's door? Some frantic idea of falling at her stern feet and pleading for him rushed into her mind. But the next moment, glancing up at the erect, motionless figure, she became dimly conscious of something that quieted her, she scarcely knew how.

The dim room was so quiet, too; there was so deep a stillness upon the whole place, it seemed that she gained a touch of courage for the instant. Priscilla was not looking at her now; her statuesque face was turned toward the wide expanse of landscape, fast dying out, as it were, in the twilight grayness. Theo's eyes rested on her for a few minutes in a remorseful pity for, and a mute yearning toward this woman whom she had so bitterly, yet so unconsciously wronged. She would not wrong her more deeply still; the wrong should end just as she had thought it had ended, when Denis dropped her hand and left her standing alone before the fire that last night in Paris. This resolve rose up in her mind with a power so overwhelming, that it carried before it all the past of rebellion, and pain, and love. She would go away before he knew that she had been with him at all. She would herself be the means of bringing to pass the end she had only so short a time ago rebelled against so passionately. He should think it was his promised wife who had been with him from the first. She would make Priscilla promise that it should be so. Having resolved this, her new courage--courage, though it was so full of desperate, heart-sick pain, helped her to ask a question bearing

upon her thoughts. She touched the motionless figure with her hand.

"Did Pamela come here to bring me away?" she asked.

Priscilla Gower turned, half starting, as though from a reverie.

"What did you say?" she said.

"Did Pamela come to take me away from here?" Theo repeated.

"No," she said. "Do not be afraid of that."

Theo looked out of the window, straight over her folded arms. The answer had not been given unkindly, but she could not look at Priscilla Gower, in saying what she had to say.

"I am not afraid," she said. "I think it would be best; I must go back to Paris or to--to Downport, before Mr. Oglethorpe knows I have been here at all. You can take care of him now--and there is no need that he should know I ever came to St. Quentin. I dare say I was very unwise in coming as I did; but, I am afraid I would do the same thing again under the same circumstances. If you will be so kind as to let him think that--that it was you who came----"

Priscilla Gower interrupted her here, in the same manner, and with the same words, as she had interrupted her before.

"Hush!" she said. "You are making a mistake, again----"

She did not finish what she was saying. A hurried footstep upon the stairs stopped her; and as both turned toward the door, it was opened, and Pamela stood upon the threshold and faced them, looking at each in the breathless pause that followed.

"There has been a change," she said. "A change for the worse. I have sent for the doctor. You had better come down-stairs at once, Theodora, you have been here long enough to understand him better than we can."

And down together they went; and the first thing that met their eyes as they entered the sick-room, was Oglethorpe, sitting up in bed, with wild eyes, haggard and fever-mad, struggling with his attendants, who were trying to hold him down, and raving aloud in the old strain Theo had heard so often.

"Why, Theo, my beauty, there are tears in your eyes. Good-by! Yes! Forgive me! Forget me, and good-by! For God's sake, Priscilla, forgive me!"