

CHAPTER IX.

WHAT COMES OF IT ALL.

The hardest professional trouble the shrivelled little French doctor had, perhaps, ever encountered, was the sight of the white, woe-stricken young face, turned up to his when Theodora North followed him out of the chamber upon the landing that night, and caught his arm in both her clinging hands.

"He will die now, doctor," she said, in an agonized whisper. "He will die now; I saw it in your face when you let his hand drop."

It would have been a hard-hearted individual who would have told the exact truth in the face of these beautiful, agonized eyes--and the little doctor was anything but hard of heart.

He patted the clinging hands quite affectionately, feeling in secret great apprehension, yet hiding his feelings admirably.

"My little mademoiselle," he said (the tall young creature at his side was almost regal, head and shoulders above him in height). "My dear little Mademoiselle Theodora, this will not do. If you give way, I shall give way too. You must help me--we must help each other, as we have been doing. It is you only who can save him--it is you he calls for. You must

hope with me until some day when he awakes to know us, and then I shall show you to him, and say, 'here is the beautiful young mademoiselle who saved you.' And then we shall see, Miss Theodora--then we shall see what a charm those words will work."

But she did not seem to be comforted, as he expected she would be.

"No," she said. "The time will never come when you can say that to him. If he is ever well enough to know me, I must go away, and no one must tell him I have been here."

Monsieur, the doctor, looked at her over his spectacles, sharply.

The pale face at once touched and suggested to him the outline of a little romance--and he had all a Frenchman's sympathy for romance--monsieur, the doctor. It was une grande passion, was it, and this tractable, beautiful young creature was going to make a sacrifice of all her hope of love, upon the altar of stern honor. But he made no comment, only patted her hand again.

"Well, well," he said. "We shall see, mademoiselle, we shall see. Only let us hope."

The days and nights of watching, in companionship with Priscilla Gower, were a heavy trial to Theo. Not that any unusual coldness in the handsome face was added to her troubles as an extra burden. Both

Priscilla and Pamela were very mindful of her comfort--so very mindful that their undemonstrative care for her cut her to the heart, sometimes. Yet, somehow, she felt herself as a stranger, without the right to watch with them. It was so terrible a thing to stand near the woman she had innocently injured, and listen with her to the impassioned adjurations of the lover who had been false, in spite of himself. It seemed his mind was always upon the one theme, and in his delirium his ravings wandered from Priscilla to Theo, and from Theo to Priscilla, in a misery that was not without its pathos. Sometimes it was that last night in Paris--and he went over his farewell, word for word; sometimes it was his wedding day--and he was frantically appealing to Priscilla for forgiveness, and remorsefully anathematizing himself.

They were both together in the room, one evening, when he was raving thus, when he suddenly paused for an instant and began to count slowly upon his fingers,

"January, February, March, April, May, June, July. My pretty Theo, what a mistake it was--only seven months, and then to have lost you. Good God, my darling!" and his voice became a low, agonized cry. "Good God, my darling! and I cannot give you up!"

Theo glanced up at Priscilla Gower, mute with misery for a moment. The erect, black-robed figure stood between herself and the fire, motionless, but the fixed face was so white that it forced a low cry from her. She could not bear it a second longer. She slipped upon her

knees on the hearth rug, and caught the hem of the black dress in her hands, in a tumult of despair and remorse.

"He does not know what he is saying," she cried, breathlessly. "Oh, forgive him, forgive him! I will go away now, if you think I ought. He knows that you are better than I am. I will go away, and you will make him happy. Oh! I know you will make him happier than I ever could have done, even if he had really loved me as--as he only thought he did."

A moment before, Priscilla had been gazing into the fire in a deep reverie. But the passionate voice stirred her. She looked down into the girl's imploring eyes, without a shadow of resentment.

"Get up," she said, a trifle huskily. "You have done no wrong to me. Get up, Theodora, and look at me."

Unsteadily as she spoke, there was so strange a power in her voice that Theo obeyed her. Wonderingly, sadly and humbly she rose to her feet, and stood before Priscilla as before a judge.

"Will you believe what I say to you?" she asked.

"Yes," answered Theo, sorrowfully.

"Well, then, I say this to you. You have not sacrificed me, you have saved me!"

It was perhaps characteristic of her that she did not say anything more. The subject dropped here, and she did not renew it.

It was a hard battle which Denis Oglethorpe fought during the next fortnight, in that small chamber of the wayside inn at St. Quentin; and it was a stern antagonist he waged war against--that grim old enemy, Death.

But, with the help of the little doctor, the *vis medicatrix naturalis*, and his three nurses, he gained the victory at length, and conquered, only by a hair's breadth. The fierce fire of the brain wearing itself out, left him as weak as a child, and for days after he returned to consciousness, he had scarcely power to move a limb or utter a word.

When first he opened his eyes upon life again, no one was in the room but Priscilla Gower; and so it was upon Priscilla Gower that his first conscious glance fell.

He looked at her for a minute, before he found strength to speak. But at last his faltering voice came back to him.

"Priscilla," he whispered weakly. "Is it you? Poor girl!"

She bent over him with a calm face, but she did not attempt to caress him.

"Yes," she said. "Don't try your strength too much yet, Denis. It is I."

His heavy wearied eyes searched hers for an instant.

"And no one else?" he whispered again. "Is no one else here, Priscilla?"

"There is no one else in the room with me," she answered, quietly. "The rest are up-stairs. You must not talk, Denis. Try to be quiet."

There was hardly any need for the caution, for his eyes were closing again, even then, through sheer exhaustion.

Theo was in her room lying down and trying to rest. But half an hour later, when Pamela came up to her bedside, the dark eyes flew wide open in an instant.

"What is it, Pam?" she asked. "Is he worse again?"

Pam sat down on the bedside, and looked at her with a sort of pity for the almost haggard young face drooping against the white pillow.

"No," she said. "He is better. The doctor said he would be, and he is. Theo, he has spoken to Priscilla Gower, and knows her."

Theo sat up in bed, white and still--all white, it seemed, but her large

hollow eyes.

"Pamela," she said. "I must go home."

"Where?" said Pam.

The white face turned toward her pitifully.

"I don't know," the girl answered, her voice fluttering almost as weakly as Denis' had done. "I don't know--somewhere, though. To Paris again--or to Downport," with a faint shudder. And then, all at once she flung up her arms wildly, and dropped upon them, face downward.

"Oh, Pam," she cried out, "take me back to Downport, and let me die. I have no right here, and I had better go away. Oh, why did I ever come? Why did I ever come?"

She was sobbing in a hysterical, strained way, that was fairly terrible. Pamela bent over her, and touched her disordered hair with a singularly light touch. The tears welled up into her faded eyes. Just at the moment she could think of nothing but the day, so far away now, when her own heart had been torn up by the roots by one fierce grasp of the hand of relentless fate--the day when Arthur had died.

"Hush, Theo," she said to her, "don't cry, child."

But the feverish, excited sobs only came the faster, and more wildly.

"Why did I ever come?" Theo gasped. "It would have been better to have lived and died in Downport--far better, I can tell you now, Pam, now that it is all over. I loved him, and he loved me, too; he loved me always from the first, though we both tried so hard, so hard; yes, we did, Pamela, to help it. And now it is all ended, and I must never see him again. I must live and die, grow old--old, and never see him again."

There was no comfort for her. Her burst of grief and despair wore itself away into a strained quiet, and she lay at length in silence, Pamela at her side. But she was suffering fearfully in her intense girlish way.

She did not say much more to Pamela, but she had made up her mind, before many hours had passed, to return to Paris. She even got up in the middle of the night, in her feverish hurry to make her slight preparations for the journey. She could go to Paris and wait till Lady Throckmorton came back, if she had not got back already, and then she could do as she was told as to the rest. She would either stay there or go to Downport with Pamela.

Fortune, however, interposed. A carriage made its appearance, in the morning, with a new arrival--an arrival no less than Lady Throckmorton herself, bearing down upon them in actual excitement.

An untoward accident had called her friend from home, and taken her to

Caen, and there, at her earnest request, her ladyship had accompanied her. The blunder of an awkward servant had prevented her receiving the letters from St. Quentin, and it was only on her return to Paris that she had learned the truth.

Intense as was her bewilderment at her protege's indiscretion, she felt a touch of admiration, at the simple, faithful daring of the girl's course.

"It is sufficiently out of the way for Priscilla Gower to be here, and she is his promised wife; and Pamela is nearly thirty-two years old and looks forty; but you, Theodora--you to run away from Paris, with no one but a maid; to run away to nurse a man like Denis Oglethorpe. It actually takes away my breath. My dear, innocent little simpleton, what were you thinking about?"

It would be futile to attempt to describe her state of mind when she discovered that Denis had not learned of Theo's presence in the house.

But, being quick-sighted, and keen of sense, she began to comprehend at last, and it was Priscilla Gower who assisted her to a clearer state of mind.

Two days later, when, after a visit to his patient, the little doctor was preparing to take his departure, Priscilla Gower addressed him suddenly, as it seemed, without the slightest regard to her ladyship's

presence.

"You think your patient improves rapidly," she said.

"Very rapidly," was the answer. "Men like him always do, mademoiselle."

She bent her head in acquiescence.

"I have a reason for asking this," she said. "Do you think he is strong enough to bear a shock?"

"Of what description, mademoiselle? Of grief, or--or of joy?"

"Of joy, monsieur," she answered, distinctly.

"Mademoiselle," said the doctor, "joy rarely kills."

She bent her erect head again.

She had not regarded the fact of her old enemy's presence ever so slightly while she spoke, but when the doctor was gone she addressed her.

"I have been thinking of returning to London at once, if possible," she said. "Miss Gower's ill-health renders any further absence a neglect. If I go, would it be possible for you to remain here, with Miss North?"

"Pamela?" suggested Lady Throckmorton.

"Theodora," was the calm reply.

An odd silence of a moment, and then the eyes of the two women met each other, in one long, steady look; Lady Throckmorton's profoundly searching, wonderingly questioning; Priscilla Gower's steadfast, calm, almost defiant.

Then Lady Throckmorton spoke.

"I will stay," she said, "and she shall stay with me."

"Thank you," with another slight bend of the handsome head. "I am going now to speak to Mr. Oglethorpe. When I open the door will you send Miss North, Theodora, to me?"

"Yes," answered her ladyship.

So Priscilla Gower crossed the narrow landing, and went into the sick-room, and her ladyship summoned Theodora North, and bade her wait, not telling her why. What passed behind the closed doors only three people can tell, and those three people are Denis Oglethorpe, his wife, and the woman who, in spite of her coldness, was truer to him than he dared be to himself. There was no sound of raised or agitated voices,

all was calm and seemingly silent. Fifteen minutes passed--half an hour; nearly an hour, and then Priscilla Gower stepped out upon the landing, and Lady Throckmorton spoke to Theo.

"Go to her," was her command. "She wants you."

The poor child arose mechanically and went out. She did not understand why she was wanted--she scarcely cared. She merely went because she was told. But when she looked up at Priscilla Gower, she caught her breath and drew back. But Priscilla held out her hand to her.

"Come," she commanded. And before Theo had time to utter a word, she was drawn into the chamber, and the door closed.

Denis was lying upon a pile of pillows, and pale as he was, she saw, in one instant, that something had happened, and that he was not unhappy, whatever his fate was to be.

"I have been telling Mr. Oglethorpe," Priscilla said to her, "all that you have done, Theodora. I have been telling him how you forgot the world, and came to him when he was at the world's mercy. I have told him, too, that five years ago he made a great mistake which I shared with him. It was a great mistake, and it had better be wiped out and done away with, and we have agreed what it shall be. So I have brought you here--"

All the blood in Theodora North's heart surged into her face, in a great rush of anguish and bewilderment.

"No! no!" she cried out. "No! no! only forgive him, and let me go. Only forgive him, and let him begin again. He must love you--he does love you. It was my fault--not his. Oh--"

Priscilla stopped her, smiling, in a half-sad way.

"Hush!" she said, quietly. "You don't understand me. The fault was only the fault of the old blunder. Don't try to throw your happiness away, Theodora. You were not made to miss it. I have not been blind all these months. How could I be? I only wanted to wait and make sure that this was not a blunder, too. I have known it from the first. Theo, I have done now--the old tangle is unravelled. Go to him, Theo, he wants you."

The next instant the door closed upon Priscilla, as she went out, and Theodora North understood clearly what she had before never dared to dream of.

There was one brief, breathless pause, and then Denis Oglethorpe held out his arms.

"My darling," he said. "Mine, my own."

She slipped down by his side, beautiful, tremulous, with glowing cheeks

and tear-wet eyes. She remembered Priscilla Gower then.

"Oh, my love!" she cried. "She is better than I am, braver and more noble; but she can never love you better, or be more faithful and true than I will be. Only try me; only try me, my darling."

* * * * *

Three months subsequently, when Pamela and Priscilla had settled down again to the routine of their old lives, there was a quiet wedding celebrated at Paris--a quiet wedding, though it was under Lady Throckmorton's patronage.

In their tender remembrance of Priscilla Gower, it was made a quiet wedding--so quiet, indeed, that the people who made the young English beauty's romance a topic of conversation and nine days' wonder, scarcely knew it had ended.

And in Broome street, Priscilla Gower read the announcement in the paper, with only the ghost of a faint pang.

"I suppose I am naturally a cold woman," she wrote to Pamela North, with whom she sustained a faithful correspondence. "I will acknowledge, at least, to a certain lack of enthusiasm. I can be faithful, but I cannot be impassioned. It is impossible for me to suffer as your pretty Theo could, as it is equally impossible for me to love as she did. I have

lost something, of course, but I have not lost all."

Between these two women there arose a friendship which was never dissolved. Perhaps the one thing they had in common, drew them toward each other; at any rate, they were faithful; and even when, three years later, Priscilla Gower married a man who loved her, and having married him, was a calmly happy woman, they were faithful to each other still.

THE END.

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