

Burnett Frances Hodgson

Theo: A Sprightly Love Story



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CHAPTER I

PREPARING FOR A JOURNEY

A heavy curtain of yellow fog rolled and drifted over the waste of beach, and rolled and drifted over the sea, and beneath the curtain the tide was coming in at Downport, and two pair of eyes were watching it. Both pair of eyes watched it from the same place, namely, from the shabby sitting-room of the shabby residence of David North, Esq., lawyer, and both watched it without any motive, it seemed, unless that the dull gray waves and their dull moaning were not out of accord with the watchers' feelings. One pair of eyes – a youthful, discontented black pair – watched it steadily, never turning away, as their owner stood in the deep, old-fashioned window, with both elbows resting upon the broad sill; but the other pair only glanced up now and then, almost furtively, from the piece of work Miss Pamela North, spinster, held in her slender, needle-worn fingers.

There had been a long silence in the shabby sitting-room for some time – and there was not often silence there. Three rampant, strong-lunged boys, and as many talkative school-girls,

made the house of David North, Esq., rather a questionable paradise. But to-day, being half-holiday, the boys were out on the beach digging miraculous sand-caves, and getting up miraculous piratical battles and excursions with the bare-legged urchins so numerous in the fishermen's huts; and Joanna and Elinor had been absent all day, so the room left to Theo and her elder sister was quiet for once.

It was Miss Pamela herself who broke the stillness. "Theo," she said, with some elder-sister-like asperity, "it appears to me that you might find something better to do than to stand with your arms folded, as you have been doing for the last half hour. There is a whole basketful of the boys' socks that need mending and –"

"Pam!" interrupted Theo, desperately, turning over her shoulder a face more like the face of some young Spanish gipsy than that of a poor English solicitor's daughter. "Pam, I should really like to know if life is ever worth having, if everybody's life is like ours, or if there are really such people as we read of in books."

"You have been reading some ridiculous novel again," said Pamela, sententiously. "If you would be a little more sensible, and less romantic, Theodora, it would be a great deal better for all of us. What have you been reading?"

The capable gipsy face turned to the window again half-impatiently.

"I have been reading nothing to-day," was the answer. "I should think you knew that – on Saturday, with everything to do,

and the shopping to attend to, and mamma scolding every one because the butcher's bill can't be paid. I was reading Jane Eyre, though, last night. Did you ever read Jane Eyre, Pamela?"

"I always have too much to do in attending to my duty," said Pamela, "without wasting my time in that manner. I should never find time to read Jane Eyre in twenty years. I wish I could."

"I wish you could, too," said Theo, meditatively. "I wish there was no such thing as duty. Duty always appears to me to be the very thing we don't want to do."

"Just at present, it is your duty to attend to those socks of Ralph and Arthur's," put in Pamela, dryly. "Perhaps you had better see to it at once, as tea will be ready soon, and you will have to cut bread for the children."

The girl turned away from the window with a sigh. Her discussions on subjects of this kind always ended in the same unsatisfactory manner; and really her young life was far from being a pleasant one. As the next in age to Pamela, though so many years lay between them, a hundred petty cares fell on her girlish shoulders, and tried her patience greatly with their weight, sometimes. And in the hard family struggle for everyday necessities there was too much of commonplace reality to admit of much poetry. The wearisome battling with life's needs had left the mother, as it leaves thousands of women, haggard, careworn, and not too smooth in disposition. There was no romance about her. She had fairly forgotten her girlhood, it seemed to lie so far behind; and even the unconquerable mother-love, that gave rise

to her anxieties, had a touch of hardness about it. And Pamela had caught something of the sharp, harassed spirit too. But Theo had an odd secret sympathy for Pamela, though her sister never suspected it. Pamela had a love-story, and in Theo's eyes this one touch of forlorn romance was the silver lining to many clouds. Ten years ago, when Pamela had been a pretty girl, she had had a lover – poor Arthur Brunwalde – Theo always mentally designated him; and only a week before her wedding-day, death had ended her love-story forever. Poor Pamela! was Theo's thought: to have loved like Jane Eyre, and Agnes Wickfield, and Lord Bacon, and to have been so near release from the bread-and-butter cutting, and squabbling, and then to have lost all. Poor Pamela, indeed! So the lovely, impulsive, romance-loving younger sister cherished an odd interest in Pamela's thin, sharp face, and unsympathizing voice, and in picturing the sad romance of her youth, was always secretly regardful of the past in her trials of the present.

As she turned over the socks in the basket, she glanced up now and then at Pamela's face, which was bent over her work. It had been a pretty face, but now there were faint lines upon it here and there; the features once delicate were sharpened, the blue eyes were faded, and the blonde hair faded also. It was a face whose youth had been its beauty, and its youth had fled with Pamela North's happiness. Her life had ended in its prime; nay, not ended, for the completion had never come – it was to be a work unfinished till its close. Poor Arthur Brunwalde!

A few more silent stitches, and then the work slipped from Theo's fingers into her lap, and she lifted her big, inconsistent eyes again.

"Pam," she said, "were you ever at Lady Throckmorton's?"

A faint color showed itself on Pamela's faded face.

"Yes," she answered, sharply, "I was once. What nonsense is running in your mind now, for goodness sake?"

Theo flushed up to her forehead, no half flush; she actually glowed all over, her eyes catching a light where her delicate dark skin caught the dusky red.

"Don't be cross, Pam," she said, appealingly. "I can't help it. The letter she sent to mamma made me think of it. Oh, Pam! if I could only have accepted the invitation."

"But you can't," said Pam, concisely. "So you may as well let the matter rest."

"I know I can't," Theo returned, her quaint resignation telling its own story of previous disappointments. "I have nothing to wear, you know, and, of course, I couldn't go there, of all places in the world, without something nice."

There was another silence after this. Theo had gone back to her work with a sigh, and Miss Pamela was stitching industriously. She was never idle, and always taciturn, and on this occasion her mind was fully occupied. She was thinking of Lady Throckmorton's invitation too.

Her ladyship was a half-sister of their father's, and from the height of her grandeur magnanimously patronizing now and

then. It was during her one visit to London, under this relative's patronage, that Pamela had met Arthur Brunwalde, and it was through her that the match had been made. But when Arthur died, and she found that Pamela was fixed in her determination to make a sacrifice of her youth on the altar of her dead love, Lady Throckmorton lost patience. It was absurd, she said; Mr. North could not afford it, and if Pamela persisted, she would wash her hands of the whole affair. But Pamela was immovable, and, accordingly, had never seen her patroness since. It so happened, however, that her ladyship had suddenly recollected Theo, whose gipsy face had once struck her fancy, and the result of the sudden recollection was another invitation. Her letter had arrived that very morning at breakfast time, and had caused some sensation. A visit to London, under such auspices, was more than the most sanguine had ever dared to dream of.

"I wish I was Theo," Joanna had grumbled. "She always gets the lion's share of everything, because Elin and I are a bit younger than she is."

And Theo had glowed up to her soft, innocent eyes, and neglected the bread-and-butter cutting, to awaken a moment later to sudden despair.

"But – but I have nothing fit to wear, mamma," she said, in anguished tones.

"No," answered Mrs. North, two or three new lines showing themselves on her harassed forehead; "and we can't afford to buy anything. You can't go, Theo."

And so the castle which had towered so promisingly in the air a moment ago, was dashed to the dust with one touch of shabby gentility's tarnished wand. The glow died out of Theo's face, and she went back to her bread-and-butter cutting with a soreness of disappointment which was, nevertheless, not without its own desperate resignation. This was why she had watched the tide come in with such a forlorn sense of sympathy with the dull sweep of the gray waves, and their dull, creeping moan; this was why she had been rash enough to hope for a crumb of sympathy even from Pamela; and this also was why, in despairing of gaining it, she bent herself to her unthankful labor again, and patched and darned until the tide had swept back again under the curtain of fog, and there was no more light, even for the stern taskmaster, poverty.

The silence was effectually broken in upon after this. As soon as the street lamps began to twinkle in the murkiness outside, the boys made their appearance – Ralph, and Arthur, and Jack, all hungry, and dishevelled, and of course, all in an uproar. They had dug a cave on the shore, and played smugglers all the evening; and one fellow had brought out a real cutlass and a real pistol, that belonged to his father, and they had played fighting the coast-guard, and they were as hungry as the dickens now; and was tea ready, and wouldn't Pam let them have some strawberry-jam?

Pamela laid her work aside, and went out of the room, and then Ralph, who was in the habit of patronizing Theo occasionally, came to his favorite corner and sat down, his rough

hands clasped round his knees, boy-fashion.

"I say, Theo," he began. "I wonder how much it would cost a fellow to buy a cutlass – a real one?"

"I don't know," Theo answered, indifferently. "I never bought a cutlass, Ralph."

"No, of course you never did. What would a girl want with a cutlass? But couldn't you guess, now – just give a guess. Would it cost a pound?"

"I daresay it would," Theo managed to reply, with a decent show of interest. "A good one."

"Well, I'd want a good one," said Ralph, meditatively; "but if it would cost a pound, I shall never have one. I say, Theo, we never do get what we want at this house, do we?"

"Not often," said Theo, a trifle bitterly.

Ralph looked up at her.

"Look here," he said, sagaciously. "I know what you are thinking of. I can tell by your eyes. You're thinking about having to stay at home from Lady Throckmorton's, and it is a shame too. If you are a girl, you could have enjoyed yourself in your girl's way. I'd rather go to their place in Lincolnshire, where old Throckmorton does his hunting. The governor says that a fellow that was a good shot could bag as much game as he could carry, and it wouldn't take long to shoot either. I can aim first rate with a bow and arrow. But that isn't what you want, is it? You want to go to London, and have lots of dresses and things. Girls always do; but that isn't my style."

"Ah, Ralph!" Theo broke out, her eyes filling all at once. "I wish you wouldn't! I can't bear to hear it. Just think of how I might have enjoyed myself, and then to think that – that I can't go, and that I shall never live any other life than this!"

Ralph opened his round Saxon eyes, in a manner slightly expressive of general dissatisfaction.

"Why, you're crying!" he said. "Confound crying. You know I don't cry because I can't go to Lincolnshire. You girls are always crying about something. Joanna and Elin cry if their shoes are shabby or their gloves burst out. A fellow never thinks of crying. If he can't get the thing he wants, he pitches in, and does without, or else makes something out of wood that looks like it."

Theo said no more. A summons from the kitchen came to her just then. Pam was busy with the tea-service, and the boys were hungry – so she must go and help.

Pamela glanced up at her sharply as she entered, but she did not speak. She had borne disappointments often enough, and had lived over them to become seemingly a trifle callous to their bitterness in others, and, as I have said, she was prone to silence. But it may be that she was not so callous after all, for at least Theo fancied that her occasional speeches were less sharp, and certainly she uttered no reproof to-night. She was grave enough, however, and even more silent than usual, as she poured out the tea for the boys. A shadow of thoughtfulness rested on her thin sharp face, and the faint, growing lines were almost deepened; but she did not "snap," as the children called it; and Theo was

thankful for the change.

It was not late when the children went to bed, but it was very late when Pamela followed them; and when she went up-stairs, she was so preoccupied as to appear almost absent-minded. She went to her room and locked the door, after her usual fashion, but that she did not retire was evident to one pair of listening ears at least. In the adjoining bedroom, where the girls slept, Theo lay awake, and could hear her every movement. She was walking to and fro, and the sounds of opening drawers and turned keys came through the wall every moment. Pamela had unaccountable secret ways, Joanna always said. Her room was a sanctuary, which the boldest did not dare to violate lightly. There were closets and boxes there, whose contents were reserved for her own eyes alone, and questions regarding them seldom met with any satisfactory answer. She was turning over these possessions to-night, Theo judged, from the sounds proceeding from her chamber. To be truthful, Theo had some curiosity about the matter, though she never asked any questions. The innate delicacy which prompted her to reverence the forlorn aroma of long-withered romance about the narrow life had restrained her. But to-night she was so wide-awake, and Joanna and Elin were so fast asleep, that every movement forcing itself upon her ear, made her more wide-awake still. The turning of keys and unlocking of drawers roused her to a whimsical meditative wonder. Poor Pam! What dead memories and confined hopes was she bringing out to the dim light of her solitary candle? Was it possible that

she ever cried over them a little when there was no one to see her relaxing mood? Poor Pam! Theo sighed again, and was just deciding to go to sleep, if possible, when she heard a door open, which was surely Pamela's, and feet crossing the narrow corridor, which were surely Pamela's own, and then a sharp yet soft tap on the door, and a voice which could have been no other than Pamela's, under any possibility.

"Theo!" it said, "I want you for a short time. Get up."

Theo was out upon the floor, and had opened the door in an instant, wider awake than ever.

"Throw something over you," said Pamela, in the dry tone that always sounded almost severe. "You will take cold if you don't. Put on a shawl or something, and come into my room."

Theodora caught up a shawl, and, stepping across the landing, stood in the light, the flare of the candle making a queer, lovely picture of her. The shawl she had wrapped carelessly over her white night-dress was one of Lady Throckmorton's gracious gifts; and although it had been worn by every member of the family in succession, and was frayed, and torn, and forlorn enough in broad daylight, by the uncertain Rembrandt glare of the chamber-candle, its gorgeous palm-leaf pattern and soft folds made a by no means unpicturesque or unbecoming drapery, in conjunction with the girl's grand, soft, un-English eyes, and equally un-English ebon hair.

"Shut the door," said Pamela. "I want to speak to you."

Theo turned to obey, wonderingly, but, as she did so, her

eyes fell upon something which made her fairly start, and this something was nothing less than the contents of the opened boxes and closets. Some of said contents were revealed through raised lids; but some of them were lying upon the bed, and the sight of them made the girl catch her breath. She had never imagined such wealth – for it seemed quite like wealth to her. Where had it all come from? There were piles of pretty, lace-trimmed garments, boxes of handkerchiefs, ribbons, and laces, and actually a number of dresses, of whose existence she had never dreamed – dresses quaint enough in fashion, but still rich and elaborate.

"Why, Pam!" she exclaimed, "whose are they? Why have you never – "

Pamela stopped her with an abrupt gesture.

"They are mine," she said. "I have had them for years, ever since Arthur – Mr. Brunwalde died. They were to have been my bridal trousseau, and most of them were presents from Lady Throckmorton, who was very kind to me then. Of course, you know well enough," with dry bitterness, "I should never have had them otherwise. I thought I would show them to you to-night, and offer them to you. They may be of use just now."

She stopped and cleared her throat here, with an odd, strained sound; and before she went on, she knelt down before one of the open trunks, and began to turn over its contents.

"I wish you to go to Lady Throckmorton's," she said, speaking without looking at the amazed young face at her side. "The life

here is a weary one for a girl to lead, without any change, and the visit may be a good thing for you in many ways. My visit to Lady Throckmorton's would have made me a happy woman, if death had not come between me and my happiness. I know I am not at fault in saying this to you. I mean it in a manner a girl can scarcely understand – I mean, that I want to save you from the life you must lead, if you do not go away from here."

Her hands were trembling, her voice, cold and dry, as it usually was, trembled too, and the moment she paused, the amazed, picturesque young figure swooped down upon her as it were, falling upon its knees, flinging its white-robed arms about her, and burying her in an unexpected confusion of black hair and oriental shawl, showering upon her loving, passionate little caresses. For the first time in her life, Theo was not secretly awed by her.

"Why, Pam!" she cried, the tears running down her cheeks. "Dear, old, generous Pamela! Do you care for me so much – enough to make such a sacrifice! Oh, Pam! I am only a girl as you say; but I think that, because I am a girl, perhaps I understand a little. Do you think that I could let you make such a sacrifice? Do you think I could let you give them to me – the things that were to have belonged to poor, dead Arthur's wife? Oh, my generous darling! Poor dead Arthur! and the poor young wife who died with him!"

For some time Pamela said nothing, but Theo felt the slender, worn form, that her arms clasped so warmly, tremble

within them, and the bosom on which she had laid her loving, impassioned face throb strangely. But she spoke at length.

"I will not say it is not a sacrifice," she said. "I should not speak truly if I did. I have never told you of these things before, and why I kept them; because such a life as ours does not make people understand one another very clearly; but to-night, I remembered that I was a girl too once, though the time seems so far away; and it occurred to me that it was in my power to help you to a happier womanhood than mine has been. I shall not let you refuse the things. I offer them to you, and expect you to accept them, as they are offered – freely."

Neither protest nor reasoning was of any avail. The elder sister meant what she said, with just the settled precision that demonstrated itself upon even the most trivial occasions; and Theo was fain to submit now, as she would have done in any smaller matter.

"When the things are of no further use, you may return them to me," Pamela said, dryly as ever. "A little managing will make everything as good as new for you now. The fashion only needs to be changed, and we have ample material. There is a gray satin on the bed there, that will make a very pretty dinner-dress. Look at it, Theo."

Theo rose from her knees with the tears scarcely dry in her eyes. She had never seen such dresses in Downport before. These things of Pamela's had only come from London the day of Arthur's death, and had never been opened for

family inspection. Some motherly instinct, even in Mrs. North's managing economy, had held them sacred, and so they had rested. And now, in her girl's admiration of the thick, trailing folds of the soft gray satin, Theodora very naturally half forgot her tears.

"Pamela!" she said, timidly, "do you think I could make it with a train? I never did wear a train, you know, and –"

There was such a quaint appeal in her mellow-lighted eyes, that Pamela perceptibly softened.

"You shall have half a dozen trains if you want them," she said; and then, half-falteringly, added, "Theo, there is something else. Come here."

There was a little carved ebony-box upon the dressing-table, and she went to it and opened it. Upon the white velvet lining lay a pretty set of jewels – sapphires, rarely pellucid; then clear pendants sparkling like drops of deep sea-water frozen into coruscant solidity.

"They were one of Mr. Brunwalde's bridal gifts to me," she said, scarcely heeding Theo's low cry of admiration. "I should have worn them upon my wedding-day. You are not so careless as most girls, Theodora, and so I will trust them to you. Hold up your arm and let me clasp one of the bracelets on it. You have a pretty arm, Theo."

It was a pretty arm in truth, and the flashing, rose-tinted pendants set it off to a great advantage. Theo, herself, scarcely dared to believe her senses. Her wildest dreams had never

pictured anything so beautiful as these pretty, modest sapphires. Was it possible that she – she was to wear them? The whole set of earrings, necklace, bracelets, rings, and everything, with all their crystallized drops and clusters! It was a sudden opening of the gates of fairyland! To go to London would have been happiness enough; but to go so like an enchanted princess, in all her enchanted finery, was more than she could realize. A color as brilliant as the scarlet in Lady Throckmorton's frayed palm-leaf shawl flew to her cheeks, she fairly clapped her hands in unconscious ecstasy.

"Oh, Pam!" she cried, with pathetic gratitude. "How good you are – how good – how good! I can't believe it, I really can't. And I will take such care of them – such care of everything. You shall see the dresses are not even crushed, I will be so careful." And then she ended with another little shower of impulsive caresses.

But it was late by this time, and with her usual forethought – a forethought which no enthusiasm could make her forget – Pamela sent her back to bed. She would be too tired to sew tomorrow, she said, prudently, and there was plenty of hard work to be done; so, with a timid farewell-kiss, Theo went to her room, and in opening her door, awakened Joanna and Elin, who sat up in bed, dimly conscious of a white figure wrapped in their august relative's shawl, and bearing a candle to light up scarlet cheeks, and inconsistent eyes, and tangled back hair.

"I am going to London," the voice pertaining to this startling figure broke out. "Joanna and Elin, do you hear? I am going to

London, to Lady Throckmorton's."

Joanna rubbed her eyes sleepily.

"Oh, yes!" she said, not too amiably by any means. "Of course you are. I knew you would. You are everlastingly going somewhere, Theo, and Elin and I stay at home, as usual. Lady Throckmorton will never invite us, I know. Where are your things going to come from?" snappishly.

"Pamela!" was Theo's deprecating reply. "They are the things that belonged to her wedding outfit. She never wore them after Mr. Brunwalde died, you know, Joanna, and she is going to lend them to me."

"Let us go to sleep, Elin," Joanna grumbled, drowsily. "We know all about it now. It's just like Pam, with her partiality. She never offered to lend them to us, and we have wanted them times and times, worse than ever Theo does now."

And then Theo went to bed also; but did not sleep, of course; only lay with eyes wide open to the darkness, as any other girl would have done, thinking excitedly of Pamela's generous gifts, and of Lady Throckmorton, and, perhaps, more than once the strange chance which had brought to light again the wedding-day, that was never more than the sad ghost of a wedding, and the bridal gifts that had come to the bride from a dead hand.

CHAPTER II

THE ARRIVAL

A great deal of hard work was done during the following week. The remodelling of the outfit was no light labor: but Pamela was steady to her trust, in her usual practical style. She trimmed, and fitted, and cut, until the always-roughened surface of her thin forefinger was rougher than ever. She kept Theo at work at the smaller tasks she chose to trust to her, and watched her sharply, with no shadow of the softened mood she had given the candle-lighted bedroom a glimpse of. She was as severe upon any dereliction from duty as ever, and the hardness of her general demeanor was not a whit relaxed. Indeed, sometimes Theo found herself glancing up furtively from her tasks, to look at the thin, sharp face, and wondering if she had not dreamed that her arms had clasped a throbbing, shaken form, when they faced together the ghost of long dead love.

But the preparations were completed at last, and the trunks packed; and Lady Throckmorton had written to say that her carriage would meet her young relative's arrival. So the time came when Theo, in giving her farewell kisses, clung a little closely about Pamela's neck, and when the cab-door had been shut, saw her dimly through the smoky glass, and the mistiness in her eyes; saw her shabby dress, and faded face, and half-longed

to go back; remembered sadly how many years had passed since she had left the dingy sea-port town to go to London, and meet her fate, and lose it, and grow old before her time in mourning it; saw her, last of all, and so was whirled up the street, and out of sight. And in like manner she was whirled through the thronged streets of London, when she reached that city at night, only that Lady Throckmorton's velvet-lined carriage was less disposed to rattle and jerk over the stones, and more disposed to an aristocratic, easily-swung roll than the musty vehicle of the Downport cabman.

There was a queer, excited thrill in her pulses as she leaned back, watching the gaslights gleaming through the fog, and the people passing to and fro beneath the gaslights. She was so near her journey's end that she began to feel nervous. What would Lady Throckmorton look like? How would she receive her? How would she be dressed? A hundred such simple, girlish wonders crowded into her mind. She would almost have been glad to go back – not quite, but almost. She had a lingering, inconsistent recollection of the contents of her trunks, and the sapphires, which was, nevertheless, quite natural to a girl so young, and so unused to even the most trivial luxuries. She had never possessed a rich or complete costume in her life; and there was a wondrous novelty in the anticipation of wearing dresses that were not remodelled from Pamela's or her mother's cast-off garments.

When the carriage drew up before the door of the solid stone house, in the solid-looking, silent square, she required all her

courage. There was a glare of gaslight around the iron grating, and a glare of gaslight from the opening door, and then, after a little confusion of entrance, she found herself passing up a staircase, under the guidance of a servant, and so was ushered into a large, handsome room, and formally announced.

An elderly lady was sitting before the fire reading, and on hearing Theo's name, she rose, and came forward to meet her. Of course, it was Lady Throckmorton, and, having been a beauty in her long past day, even at sixty-five Lady Throckmorton was quite an imposing old person. Even in her momentary embarrassment, Theo could not help noticing her bright, almond-shaped brown eyes, and the soft, close little curls of fine snow-white hair, that clustered about her face under her rich, black-lace cap.

"Theodora North, is it?" she said, offering her a wrinkled yet strong white hand. "I am glad to see you, Theodora. I was afraid you would be too late for Sir Dugald's dinner, and here you are just in time. I hope you are well, and not tired."

Theo replied meekly. She was quite well, and not at all tired, which seemed to satisfy her ladyship, for she nodded her handsome old head approvingly.

"Very well, then, my dear," she said. "I will ring for Splaighton to take you up-stairs, and attend to you. Of course, you will want to change your dress for dinner, and you have not much time. Sir Dugald never waits for anybody, and nothing annoys him more than to have dinner detained."

Accordingly, greatly in awe of Sir Dugald, whoever he might be, Theodora was pioneered out of the room again, and up another broad stair-case, into an apartment as spacious and luxurious as the one below. There her toilet was performed and there the gray satin was donned in some trepidation, as the most suitable dress for the occasion.

She stepped before the full-length mirror to look at herself before going down, and as she did so, she was conscious that her waiting-woman was looking at her too in sedate approval. The gray satin was very becoming. Its elaborate richness and length of train changed the undeveloped girl, to whom she had given a farewell glance in the small mirror at Downport, to the stateliest of tall young creatures. Her bare arms and neck were as soft and firm as a baby's; her *riant*, un-English face seemed all aglow of color and mellow eyes. But for the presence of the maid, she would have uttered a little cry of pleasure, she was so new to herself.

It was like a dream, the going down-stairs in the light and brightness, and listening to the soft sweep of the satin train; but it was singularly undream-like to be startled as she was by the rushing of a huge Spanish mastiff, which bounded down the steps behind her, and bounding upon her dress, nearly knocked her down. The animal came like a rush of wind, and simultaneously a door opened and shut with a bang; and the man who came out to follow the dog, called to him in a voice so rough that it might have been a rush of wind also.

"Sabre!" he shouted. "Come back, you scoundrel!" and then his heavy feet sounded upon the carpet. "The deuce!" he said, in an odd, low mutter, which sounded as though he was speaking half to her, half to himself. "My lady's protege, is it? The other Pamela! Rather an improvement on Pamela, too. Not so thin."

Theo blushed brilliantly – a full-blown rose of a blush, and hesitated, uncertain what etiquette demanded of her under the circumstances. She did not know very much about etiquette, but she had an idea that this was Sir Dugald, whoever Sir Dugald might be. But Sir Dugald set her mind at rest on nearing her.

"Good-evening, Theodora," he said, unceremoniously. "Of course, it is Theodora."

Theo bowed, and blushed more brilliantly still.

"All the better," said this very singular individual. "Then I haven't made a mistake," and, reaching, as he spoke, the parlor door at the foot of the stairs, and finding that the mastiff was stretched upon the mat, he favored him with an unceremonious, but not unfriendly kick, and then opened the door, the dog preceding them into the room with slow stateliness.

"You are a quick dresser, I am glad to see, Theodora," said Lady Throckmorton, who awaited them. "Of course, there is no need of introducing you two to each other. Sir Dugald does not usually wait for ceremonies."

Sir Dugald looked down at the lovely face at his side with a ponderous stare. He might have been admiring it, or he might not; at any rate, he was favoring it with a pretty close inspection.

"I believe Sir Dugald has not introduced himself to me," said Theo, in some confusion. "He knew that I was Theodora North; but I – "

"Oh!" interposed her ladyship, as collectedly as if she had scarcely expected anything else, "I see. Sir Dugald Throckmorton. Theodora – your uncle."

By way of returning Theo's modest little recognition of the presentation, Sir Dugald nodded slightly, and, after giving her another stare, turned to his mastiff, and laid a large muscular hand upon his head. He was not a very prepossessing individual, Sir Dugald Throckmorton.

Lady Throckmorton seemed almost entirely oblivious of her husband's presence; she solaced herself by ignoring him.

When they rose from the table together, the authoritative old lady motioned Theo to a seat upon one of the gay foot-stools near her.

"Come and sit down by me," she said. "I want to talk to you, Theodora."

Theo obeyed with some slight trepidation. The rich-colored old brown eyes were so keen as they ran over her. But she seemed to be satisfied with her scrutiny.

"You are a very pretty girl, Theodora," she said. "How old are you?"

"I am sixteen," answered Theo.

"Only sixteen," commented my lady. "That means only a baby in Downport, I suppose. Pamela was twenty when she came to

London, and I remember – Well, never mind. Suppose you tell me something about your life at home. What have you been doing all these sixteen years?"

"I had always plenty to do," Theo answered. "I helped Pamela with the housework and the clothes-mending. We did not keep any servant, so we were obliged to do everything for ourselves."

"You were?" said the old lady, with a side-glance at the girl's slight, dusky hands. "How did you amuse yourself when your work was done?"

"We had not much time for amusements," Theo replied, demurely, in spite of her discomfort under the catechism; "but sometimes, on idle days, I read or walked on the beach with the children, or did Berlin-wool work."

"What did you read?" proceeded the august catechist. She liked to hear the girl talk.

"Love stories," more demurely still, "and poetry, and sometimes history; but not often history – love stories and poetry oftenest."

The clever old face was studying her with a novel sort of interest. Upon the whole, my lady was not sorry she had sent for Theodora North.

"And, of course, being a Downport baby, you have never had a lover. Pamela never had a lover before she came to me."

A lover. How Theodora started and blushed now to be sure!

"No, madame," she answered, and, in a perfect wonder of confusion, dropped her eyes, and was silent.

But the very next instant she raised them again at the sound of the door opening. Somebody was coming in, and it was evidently somebody who felt himself at home, and at liberty to come in as he pleased, and when the fancy took him, for he came unannounced entirely.

Theo found herself guilty of the impropriety of gazing at him wonderingly as he came forward, but Lady Throckmorton did not seem at all surprised.

"I have been expecting you, Denis," she said. "Good-evening! Here is Theodora North. You know I told you about her."

Theo rose from her footstool at once, and stood up tall and straight – a young sultana, the youngest and most innocent-looking of sultanas, in unimperial gray satin. The gentleman was looking at her with a pair of the handsomest eyes she had ever seen in her life.

Then he made a low, ceremonious bow, which had yet a sort of indolence in its very ceremony, and then having done this much, he sat down, as if he was very much at home indeed.

"I thought I would run in on my way to Broome street," he said. "I am obliged to go to Miss Gower's, though I am tired out to-night."

"Obliged!" echoed her ladyship.

"Well – yes," the gentleman answered, with cool negligence. "Obliged in one sense. I have not seen Priscilla for a week."

The handsome, strongly-marked old eyebrows went up.

"For a week," remarked their owner, quite sharply. "A long

time to be absent."

It was rather unpleasant, Theodora thought, that they should both seem so thoroughly at liberty to say what they pleased before her, as if she was a child. Their first words had sufficed to show her that "Miss Gower's" – wherever Miss Gower's might be, or whatever order of place it was – was a very objectionable place in Lady Throckmorton's eyes.

"Well – yes," he said again. "It is rather a long time, to tell the truth."

He seemed determined that the matter should rest here, for he changed the subject at once, having made this reply, thereby proving to Theo that he was used to having his own way, even with Lady Throckmorton. He was hard-worked, it seemed, from what he said, and had a great deal of writing to do. He was inclined to be satirical, too, in a careless fashion, and knew quite a number of literary people, and said a great many sharp things about them, as if he was used to them, and stood in no awe whatever of them and their leonine greatness. But he did not talk to her, though he looked at her now and then; and whenever he looked at her, his glance was a half-admiring one, even while it was evident that he was not thinking much about her. He did not remain with them very long, scarcely an hour, and yet she was almost sorry to see him go. It was so pleasant to sit silent and listen to these two worldly ones, as they talked about their world. But he had promised Priscilla that he would bring her a Greek grammar she required; and a broken promise was a sin

unpardonable in Priscilla's eyes.

When he was gone, and they had heard the hall-door close upon him, the stillness was broken in upon by my lady herself.

"Well, my dear," she said, to Theodora. "What is your opinion of Mr. Denis Oglethorpe?"

"He is very handsome," said Theo, in some slight embarrassment. "And I think I like him very much. Who is Priscilla, aunt?"

She knew that she had said something amusing by Lady Throckmorton's laughing quietly.

"You are very like Pamela, Theodora," she said. "It sounds very like Pamela – what Pamela used to be – to be interested in Priscilla."

"I hope it wasn't rude?" fluttered the poor little rose-colored sultana.

"Not at all," answered Lady Throckmorton. "Only innocent. But I can tell you all about Priscilla in a dozen words. Priscilla is a modern Sappho. Priscilla is an elderly young lady, who never was a girl – Priscilla is my poor Denis Oglethorpe's *fiancee*."

"Oh!" said Theodora.

Her august relative drew her rich silk skirts a little farther away from the heat of the fire, and frowned slightly; but not at Theodora – at Priscilla, in her character of *fiancee*.

"Yes," she went on. "And I think you would agree with me in saying poor Denis Oglethorpe, if you could see Priscilla."

"Is she ugly?" asked Theo, concisely.

"No," sharply. "I wish she was; but at twenty-two she is elderly, as I said just now – and she never was anything else. She was elderly when they were engaged, five years ago."

"But why – why didn't they get married five years ago, if they were engaged?"

"Because they were too poor," Lady Throckmorton explained; "because Denis was only a poor young journalist, scribbling night and day, and scarcely earning his bread and butter."

"Is he poor now?" ventured Theo again.

"No," was the answer. "I wish he was, if it would save him from the Gowers. As it is, I suppose, if nothing happens to prevent it, he will marry Priscilla before the year is out. Not that it is any business of mine, but that I am rather fond of him – very fond of him, I might say, and I was once engaged to his father."

Theo barely restrained an ejaculation. Here was another romance – and she was so fond of romances. Pamela's love-story had been a great source of delight to her; but if Mr. Oglethorpe's father had been anything like that gentleman himself, what a delightful affair Lady Throckmorton's love-story must have been! The comfortable figure in the arm-chair at her side caught a glow of the faint halo that surrounded poor Pam; but in this case the glow had a more roseate tinge, and was altogether free from the funereal gray that in Pamela always gave Theo a sense of sympathizing discomfort.

The next day she wrote to Pamela:

"I have not had time yet to decide how I like Lady

Throckmorton," she said. "She is very kind to me, and asks a good many questions. I think I am a little afraid of her; but perhaps that is because I do not know her very well. One thing I am sure of, she doesn't like either Sir Dugald or his dog very much. We had a caller last night – a gentleman. A Mr. Denis Oglethorpe, who is a very great favorite of Lady Throckmorton. He is very handsome, indeed. I never saw any one at all like him before – any one half so handsome and self-possessed. I liked him very much because he talked so well, and was so witty. I had on the gray satin when he came, and the train hung beautifully. I am glad we made it with a train, Pamela. I think I shall wear the purple cloth to-night, as Lady Throckmorton said that perhaps he might drop in again, and he knows so many grand people, that I should like to look nice. There seems to be a queer sort of friendship between aunt and himself, though somehow I fancied he did not care much about what she said to him. He is engaged to be married to a very accomplished young lady, and has been for several years; but they were both too poor to be married until now. The young lady's name is Priscilla Gower; and Lady Throckmorton does not like her, which seems very strange to me. She is as poor as we are, I should imagine, for she gives French and Latin lessons, and lives in a shabby house. But I don't think that is the reason Lady Throckmorton does not like her. I believe it is because she thinks she is not suited to Mr. Oglethorpe. I hope she is mistaken, for Mr. Oglethorpe is very nice indeed, and very clever. He is a journalist, and has written a book of beautiful poetry. I found the volume this morning, and have been

reading it all day. I think it is lovely; but Lady Throckmorton says he wrote it when he was very young, and makes fun of it now. I don't think he ought to, I am sure. I shall buy a copy before I return, and bring it home to show you. I will write to mamma in a day or so. With kisses and love, and a hundred thanks again for the dresses, I remain, my dearest Pamela, your loving and grateful,

"Theo."

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."

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