

## VOLUME III

### CHAPTER 18

“O! Ten times faster Venus’ pigeons fly  
To seal love’s bonds new made, than they are wont  
To keep obliged faith unforfeited.”

*Merchant of Venice.*

MISS O’HEGARTY and Dermot Blake were breakfasting together one frosty morning. It was chilly out of doors, as one might see from the fine red noses of the people who went by; but a blazing fire prevented the occupants of the room from feeling any discomfort. A huge pointer lay on the rug, thumping the floor with his thick tail as he gazed into his master’s face, watching for the piece of dry toast or the drumstick which was certain to reward his patience. It was eleven o’clock; the breakfast was unusually late, for Dermot had only come up from Blakestown by the night-mail, and had taken a good sleep to make up for his lost rest. Miss O’Hegarty, who had finished her breakfast some time, was reading the newspaper.

“Here it is at last!” she cried; “listen, Dermot. “Now, I do declare!”

“At St. George’s, Hanover Square. By the reverend,—um, um,—O’Rooney Hogan, Esq., barrister-at-law, to Diana, only daughter of the late Drelincourt Bursford, of Bursford Castle, County Armagh.’

“There now! She’s done it at last, hasn’t she? And he’s not even an M.P.”

“Not even as much as an M.P.,” grinned Dermot, mightily tickled at the conceit. “Poor Diana! She’s off at last.”

“And that unfortunate mother of hers! Fancy,—she has allowed herself to be bamboozled into bringing all her nice comfortable things, her furniture and everything, over to London; to live with them, by the way. Long that’ll last, won’t it?”

“Behave yourself, Spot, I say,” said Dermot to the pointer, who had stuffed his moist nose almost into his master’s hand. “Doesn’t she agree with the son-in-law—hey, ma’am?”

“Not she: how would she? Low fellow!—a friend and companion of that Saltasche man, who drowned himself, you remember; when he was being brought home to be tried. A low fellow. Got into society here somehow, through Saltasche. Thank goodness, things are changed now. With a Conservative Government we may hope for a little decency.”

“Yes, I recollect Saltasche,” said Dermot thoughtfully. “I saw him on the Pier that first Sunday I was there; the Sunday I met Nellie.”

“Was it not an extraordinary thing that all the money should have been recovered, though? I declare I never heard of such a romance; and how it was, no one knows.”

“What money?”

“Did you not hear, Dermot? Why, nearly sixty thousand pounds were placed by some person in the hands of the solicitors who were engaged by the company he had cheated. Nobody knows who it was. Poor Mr. Grey was telling me about it the other day. They say it was some lady: but one of the conditions under which the restitution was made was, that nothing should be said about the person who conducted the negotiations.”

“Why, it’s a perfect romance! Well, well, I hope that unfortunate Grey will get his money back.”

“They have hopes of it. Poor things! it was an awful shock to them. They tell me that wretched Captain Poignarde, whose wife used to play so beautifully, is dead—died shortly after his arrival in India. She is teaching in London, and gets on remarkably well. I hope she’ll get a pension.”

“Who, ma’am? who are you talking of?”

“Augh! I am stupid. I forgot you did not know them. They had gone away, to be sure, before you came home. I had it on my mind to tell Nell about it.”

“Dear me!” Dorothy began again after a pause, during which she had been engaged on her newspaper; “what a crowd of people were at the levee! Quite a different class, too, from last year’s people. It used to be perfectly dreadful to see what the Castle was reduced to. It’s really a comfort to one. Dermot dear, you should have gone: really, now, you should.”

“Lie down, Spot, you rascal. Is it the Castle you are talking about, ma’am? Not one bit of me. I’ll never go near it.”

“Well, now!” said Dorothy, looking up on hearing the clock strike, “Nellie ought to be here by this; she ought indeed. I told her to come over the first thing in the morning. Poor child! she’s looking badly of late—very badly. It’s wretched for her there by herself.”

Dermot had finished his breakfast, and had turned round to the fire—the pointer’s muzzle resting affectionately on his knee; and was looking thoughtfully into the red mass of coals.

“What’s the date of that announcement of Di. Bursford’s wedding?” asked he lazily, lifting the dog’s ears between his fingers.

“Yesterday, I suppose: no, the day before,” replied his aunt, looking at the date.

“I suppose it is in every paper in Dublin. Well! well! well!”

“Poor Emily Bursford! It is a trial for her. I quite foresee the end of that poor woman. This pair will have to emigrate as soon as that idiot Diana has given him all her money; and then her mother will have to go into lodgings or a boarding-house. It all comes of bringing people out of their proper sphere in life. That Hogan man should have been left where he was.”

“Well, I’ll go and have a smoke in the greenhouse. When did you say Nellie was to be here?”

“If she’s not here by twelve, I shan’t expect her. I do wonder what is keeping the child. It is really——”

What it really was Dermot Blake never knew; he was off to the little greenhouse on the leads, to smoke.

Here he seated himself on a bench, and began to read the paper—blowing great wreaths of smoke from his cigar to the right and left of him. But Dermot did not read long; the paper was presently laid on a bench beside him, and he got up and began to walk up and down the tiled floor. His elbows brushed the fern-leaves, which hung down limp and rusty from the pots on the shelves at his side; and the pale white primulas trembled and let fall a blossom or two at the unwonted shock of his heavy tread. There was a mist, such as often comes with frost, outside; and the window-panes were thick with steam; but overhead he could see through an open pane that the day was clearing and there was a promise of sunshine. Until his cigar was finished, Dermot paced to and fro, meditating evidently, and frowning and biting his heavy moustache. At last, after a quarter of an hour spent thus, he passed through a door on the lobby into his own room; whence he emerged shortly, ready to go out. He went downstairs quietly, as if he desired to go out unobserved; but Spot, the parlour door being open, heard from the hearthrug the welcome sound of his master's walking-boots, and dashed out, leaping and yelling with excitement at the idea of a walk. Dermot nodded assent, as he selected a cane; and both set out.

When he got to the corner of the street he looked at his watch; he was late for the twelve o'clock train. He calculated that if Nellie came into town by it he ought to meet her on her way to Fitzgerald Place, within the next five minutes. So he and Spot strolled on together, keeping a sharp look-out for a slender figure in deep black. He met no one, however; and by the time he had crossed the bridge he had made up his mind that Nellie was not coming at all. It was too early to go to the club. He felt inclined to take a long walk: it seemed just the day for a smart tramp out into the country. And he thought he might as well walk out in the Green Lanes direction as in any other; so, whistling Spot to heel, he soon left the thoroughfares behind, and was rapidly approaching the country roads of Green Lanes. They looked muddy and bleak, although the frost of the previous night had hardened everything. Where the sun was shining the ground was again loosened, and the traveller slipped from a footway dry and hard, like iron, into soft, yielding slush.

Dermot soon found himself in the avenue in which the Davorens' house was situated. And now, self-possessed and decided as he usually was, he felt a little uncertain. He had not been in the house since that day last September when he had accompanied Dorothy to see the Davorens; although he had frequently met Nellie in Fitzgerald Place. He

wondered what she would think of him. He could easily say, however, that Dorothy had sent him; and he cudgelled his brains for an excuse. By this time he had reached the gates. The side-door was open, and he entered the front. It looked desolate and gloomy enough: the aloe tubs were damp-looking, and the green paint wanted renewing; the front of the house was dark and sunless, and the dead creepers and bare rose-trees hung down neglected. Altogether it had a bleak, solitary look—widely different from the aspect it had worn when he visited it the previous summer. He looked up at the windows as he approached the house, trying to discover a glimpse of Nellie. But nothing could he see. The lattice panes were untenanted and dark, in their framing of dead jessamine and rose-branches.

A servant showed him into the parlour, saying she believed Miss Davoren was there. The room was half dark; and Dermot, coming in out of the strong sunlight, for a moment was unable to see anything.

“How do you do, Mr. Blake?” said a quiet voice beside him.

He started round. Nellie was sitting in a window close to the door he had entered by; and he had passed without seeing her. She was sewing, and laid down her work as she advanced to meet him.

It was the first time Dermot Blake had seen her since her mother’s death; and he was startled to find her so changed. She looked pale and haggard; her eyes were dull and lustre-less; there were dark circles round them; and the forehead wore a fretted, pained contraction.

“Nellie, poor child!” said he, “what trouble you’ve been in!”

Dermot was no master of words; but the pressure of his great hand and the kind sympathizing look of his eyes as he bent down close to her, carried with them whole volumes of sincerity and unmistakable good-will.

She looked up gratefully, with tear-filled eyes, as she held out her hand and murmured some inaudible words of thanks.

Dermot sat down beside her, and leaning one elbow on the back of his chair, pulled his whiskers with his fingers thoughtfully. Nellie seemed struggling to keep back her tears and to try and speak at the same time; and he did not know what to say. Spot, who had of course rushed into the parlour along with his master, having made the circuit of the room in dog fashion, came up and laid his head on his master’s knee. Nellie at last managed to speak.

“You came from Blakestown yesterday, did you, Mr. Blake?”

“Yes,” replied Dermot, quite cheerfully now that the ice had been broken; “last night; fetched Spot up with me: he’s company, you know, when I go out to walk.”

Then another pause ensued; and Dermot, desperate, plunged headlong into the business of his visit.

“Nellie, why didn’t you come over to us this morning? You promised to come, you know.”

“Oh, I couldn’t do it—I couldn’t, indeed!”

“And why not, Nellie? Now, don’t turn away that way. Say why couldn’t you come? What was it?”

But Dermot got no answer. He rose and walked down to a far window looking out on the garden, wintry and black, with only here and there an early crocus showing its yellow head above the box edges. No sun shone into it, and the hoar-frost lay still on the beds. He looked out for a moment only; then turned and walked back to where she was sitting, and standing drawn up to his full height, fixed his great eyes upon her with a determined look.

“Nellie,” said he, standing and looking down at her; “I can guess why you didn’t come.”

A quick flush mounted over cheek and brow; and her eyes met his angrily for a moment,—for a moment only, then drooped in confusion. But if her eyes were timid, not so her tongue.

“You have no right to talk to me so, Mr. Blake,” she began, in a would-be sturdy tone. “What do you mean? It’s most unkind of you;” and then all the sturdiness vanished, and she began to cry outright.

“I don’t mean it for unkindness, Nellie, and well you know it; tell the truth to me: it was because—because of——”

Dermot did not finish the sentence. His eyes turned meaningly to a paper lying on the table near him. And then, taking both her hands in his, he sat down again beside her, nearer than before.

“Nellie, this is folly—wicked folly of you. No! you needn’t say one word; I have known it all along. The idea of you and that worthless scamp: it’s atrocious! Not a syllable will I hear from you. I have a right to speak, and I will. He is a worthless scamp—a paltry wretch; and he sold himself to Saltasche, that schemer who drowned himself the other day;

and he sold himself again to other people; and now he has sold himself to his wife.”

She had pulled away her hands and hidden her face in them.

“Don’t you know I’m speaking the truth, Nellie dear? Don’t you know I feel for you—that I love you. Yes, just that,—ever since the first day I saw you, I did. Don’t you hear me?”

Dermot tried to pull down her hands, to make her look at him. Her hands fell suddenly; and with a spring she was away from the window to the hearthrug, looking at him with eyes that sparkled with indignation.

“Yes, I do hear you; and I won’t listen to you. You malign a man who never saw you, whom you don’t know, on mere hearsay, and behind his back. It is unmanly,—ungentlemanly.”

“Stop,” said he, quietly. “You don’t know what you’re saying. I can prove everything, —if proof be necessary,” he added with a sneer. Then following her, he said, in a different tone,—

“I can’t bear to think, Nellie, that you, who have so many real trials, should add to your own burden. Dear child, forgive me if I have pained you. Put that fellow out of your head,—he never could have been in your heart, I’m sure, Nell,—and let us be friends.”

He held out his hand. She raised her eyes timidly to his, and placed her hand in his broad palm.

“Now we understand each other. Come here and sit down a moment, and then go and get ready. I won’t have you here by yourself any longer: it’s not good for you. It’s a horrible life. You’ll kill yourself.”

“Where am I to go?” she said, with a wistful look. “To Dorothy?”

“To Dorothy first, anyhow,” replied Dermot, giving his moustache a twirl. “After that—After that, Blakestown, Nellie, and me.”

“Nothing of the—Oh! dear me! how dare you, Mr. Dermot Blake! Really—”

“Well, there!” and he released her. “I won’t vex you; but, Nell, you will think of that. Say you will.”

“Mr. Blake, what do you mean?” Nellie was stroking down her ruffled plumage at a safe distance and looking at Dermot with eyes in which surprise at his audacity and vexation were blended together.

“Marry me. There now! You’re the only girl I ever asked in my life, or cared to ask. I don’t want to hurry you, dear. I’ll wait as long as you like. Only give me some hope, Nellie.”

Nellie was leaning against the window. She turned round and said gravely, “This is no time to talk of such things; we ought both to have remembered that—”

“Say you’ll have me: I only want that. Of course we can put off everything till after Easter.” Dermot’s eyes were dancing with delight.

“After Easter, Mr. Blake! You must be mad!” Nellie looked at him with eyes of astonishment. “What on earth will Dorothy say?”

“Never mind. I don’t; nor what any one else says, either. I may hope, then, may I, Nell? Say yes,” whispered he imploringly, taking her hand in his: “yes, Dermot.”

But Nellie would not answer at all; she drew her hand from his gravely and was turning as if to leave the room. But Dermot with two long steps was at the door before her and planted his broad back against it.

“Listen, Nellie,” said he, holding up a warning finger; “mind what I say to you, I am in earnest: if you don’t consent to marry me, I’ll start to-night to the other end of the world and never come back. And then,” nodding his head, “you’ll be sorry—and Dorothy——”

But Nellie had sunk into a chair and was crying. Dermot was beside her in a moment.

“Don’t, my darling; there now, Nellie, I didn’t mean a syllable of it. Oh! my poor child! what a brute I’ve been—”

“No, no!” she said through her tears.

“No—hav’nt I?” said he suddenly. “I won’t tease you then; look up. Nell! look at me, I say.” And Dermot succeeded in drawing down her hands. “I am really sorry, indeed I am. You’ll forgive me?”

“Yes.” She said.

“And we’ll be friends, won’t we?”

“Oh! Yes, Dermot.”

“Listen though: sometime or another I may ask you again?”

“Oh! now don’t”—and she began to cry again.

“Well, there now, I won’t.”

\* \* \* \* \*

But he did, not very long after, and successfully.