VOLUME III

CHAPTER 19

"REFORM CLUB.

"DEAR MRS. BURSFORD,—

"Your letter reached me in due time, and I must ask you to pardon my delay in replying to it.

"I find, upon inquiry, that the amount of patronage remaining at the disposal of the late Government is very limited indeed, and that there are an immense number of applicants for the few posts yet unfilled. Amongst them are so many persons who have substantial claims on the Ministry that I fear I would not be justified in holding out any hopes whatever of an appointment such as you mention. If there is any other way in which I can be of service to you, I beg, my dear Mrs. Bursford, that you will not fail to command me. With kindest regards to Miss Bursford,

"I am, yours most sincerely,

"BLANQUIÈRE."

Such was the letter which reached Mrs. Bursford one afternoon, nearly a week after she had written in accordance with Diana's behests to Lord Blanquière.

She took off her spectacles, and laid them on the mantelpiece on top of the letter. Then she sat down in her easy-chair, to think over the affair. Would Hogan and Diana break off the match? In her heart Mrs. Bursford sincerely hoped so. She had objected to him from the first, and now she disliked him excessively. Still this last week she could have tolerated the

match, so long as there was a prospect of a post of some sort being found for him. Now that was definitely settled. If they persisted in marrying, what on earth were they to live on? To be sure there was his five pounds a week as editor of the Beacon. A most uncertain thing, no doubt. Diana would not be dissuaded by this check, she felt sure. No: that she would not! And the old lady nodded her head. Her only hope was that Hogan would cry off at the last moment. There would be the talk—the ill-natured comments—to be gone through over again. Well, they could live that down, as they had done before. Anything would be better than ——

But here the door opened; and Diana, dressed for the afternoon in a charming costume of cashmere and silk—a Regent Street copy of Worth, with her blonde hair arranged in its most becoming manner—walked in. A glance at her mother told her that she had received some intelligence.

"There is Lord Blanquière's letter," said the elder lady, indicating its position by a glance.

Diana walked over quickly, and took it up. Her mother watched her face as she read. She noted the mortified, anxious look that spread over it—the raised, petulant eyebrows. Then, when she got to the end, the lips closed in moody determination; and Mrs. Bursford knew by the expression of her daughter's face, as she laid down the missive, that she had chosen her part, and that dispute or expostulation was bootless.

"There is an end of that, then," she said shortly.

"I should say so, indeed," returned her mother. "Nothing for nothing nowadays. The Government has something else to do, indeed, I imagine, with its offices (you see what he says about persons who have no claims upon them), than give them to persons like this."

"I saw nothing of the kind, mamma," said Diana, flashing an angry look across the hearthrug. "You are a little late in the day with your observations. Pray, if you knew so much, why did you write to Lord Blanquière at all?"

"Because I was a fool, I suppose. However, we are no worse off than before; and it may be all for the best."

Then Mrs. Bursford put on her spectacles, and settled herself in her easy-chair comfortably, to conjure up pleasant visions over her netting of Hogan's withdrawal. She hoped that he would have more sense, as she put it, than her daughter. As for the thousand pounds, she was willing even to forego that. Mrs. Bursford's views were tolerably selfish.

If her daughter married, it would be difficult for her to maintain the big house in Merrion Street by herself. Altogether, her comforts would be seriously interfered with. She liked society; and as long as Diana was with her, had an excuse for frequenting those assemblages which she protested she attended only for her sake, but which in reality she enjoyed thoroughly. She must be relegated henceforth to the position of an old dowager whose occupation is gone. Moreover, Mrs. Bursford by no means subscribed to the fairy-tale dogma—"married and lived happily ever after." She had a shrewd suspicion, confirmed by her own experience, that the prince and princess found the reverse side of the medal not quite so beautiful and sunshiny as it had been pictured to them; and she foresaw a long and endless vista of trouble, torment, and wretchedness to come. Why Diana could not make up her mind to accept the inevitable puzzled her. She was now in her five-and-thirtieth year. Her temper was a trial, no doubt; but she had grown accustomed to that. Altogether, the old lady felt it a terrible grievance.

There was, to be sure, the probability that Hogan would back out. He might be very glad of the excuse afforded by Lord Blanquière's decision; however, in a minute or two they would know that.

Diana, who had been sitting still, looking thoughtfully into the fire, rose now, and took down his lordship's letter again.

"You see what he says here, mamma. 'If there be any other way in which I can serve you.' That really looks as if he meant it. I am quite certain he could do something and would too if we asked him."

Mrs. Bursford had not time to reply. The door was opened, and the servant announced Mr. Hogan.

He came in slowly, walking with a listless, indolent step, which had lately become habitual to him; and having greeted both the ladies dropped languidly into a chair. The last three months had made a wonderful change in Hogan's appearance. Ten years could hardly have aged him more. All the fire and spirit of his face, the buoyancy of bearing, the bright confident tone that characterized him, were gone. He spoke with a depressed voice and indolently, as if this effort were beyond him, and his face bore marks of dissipation and late hours. In truth, of late he had not been keeping regular hours, to say the least of it. He had sought in vain to drown his remorse, and in wild, feverish excitement to get away from the memories that haunted him—the past that mocked him and the future that threatened. Nellie Davoren's face and wondering blue

eyes swam before him in his dreams; and even in Clarges Street the scent of Diana's pots of violets carried him back to the garden at Green Lanes. He forgot the noise of the London street, the sickly warmth of the heated room; Diana's voice fell unheeded on his ears. He was walking once more among the apple trees, in the fragrance of the new leaves and the moist sweet smell of the earth after the April shower: the old hopes, the foregone ambitions, rose before him and mocked him; and he ground his teeth in vain anger at his own folly and his own treachery. There was no help for it now. He must go on; he must drink the cup to the dregs. Sometimes, indeed, a wild vision of flight would pass before his brain; but he lacked the courage and energy to realize its possibility, even—much less to carry it out. He abandoned himself to his fate. He let go all his aspirations, all his hopes of distinction, of success. Left to himself now, he must have come ere long to starvation; his will and energies seemed paralysed, and he looked to Diana's cold, clear brain to help him, to maintain and stay him up.

After a while Mrs. Bursford, seeing that no mention was made by Diana of the communication from Lord Blanquière, withdrew, and left the pair to discuss their prospects together.

As soon as she was gone, Diana rose and handed the letter to Hogan. She said nothing, but stood while he read it, leaning one elbow on the chimney-piece watching him anxiously.

"Just what I expected," was his comment when he had finished. "It was ill advised, I really think, to ask for anything from the Government. Something else, now—a secretaryship, or something of that sort—would be more practicable."

Diana drew a deep breath of relief. "You think, then, that we might apply to him in his private capacity?"

"I've no doubt he could do more that way. He is, as you say, under heavy obligations to your father. Oh dear, yes. Meantime, Diana, what do you think of this?"

"This" was a ring, which he took from a tiny morocco case—a circlet of dead gold, in which was set one large emerald surrounded by diamond sparks. The emerald had a flaw in it; but that was only perceptible to experts and to people who were told about it. The cost was forty-five pounds—that is, it would cost that sum when it should be paid for—which, it is hardly necessary to say, it was not.

Diana was enchanted. She admired emeralds above all precious stones in the world,—and the sweet little diamond sparks! How had he known so well, so exactly, what pleased her?

After a time Mrs. Bursford came in, and Diana acquainted her with her lover's decision. It was quite absurd to imagine that a Government appointment could be obtained in that way. She wondered how they could have been so silly as to imagine it possible. Dear Lord Blanquière would of course be only too happy to exert his influence privately. A secretaryship, now.

Hogan, standing with his back to the fire, watching, with a somewhat dreary smile, the emerald glistening on Diana's third finger, assented to all she said.

Mrs. Bursford smiled grimly. She, too, noticed the engaged ring on her daughter's finger, but with very different feelings.

When Hogan was gone, Diana sat turning it round and round meditatively.

"I wonder what that cost?" said Mrs. Bursford coldly.

"I am sure it was seventy or eighty pounds. Emeralds are very costly now—quite as much so as diamonds," said Diana.

"I hope not, indeed," was the sententious reply.

"It is lovely," went on Diana, holding up the ring close to her face, and turning it round with the thumb and forefinger of her right hand.

"I am glad you like it, my dear; that's all. You will have to pay for it, I have no doubt."

This went unnoticed by Diana. She was in a good humour now that no taunts could ruffle; and she merely smiled in reply to her mother's acrimonious saying.

"Then," continued Mrs. Bursford, "I suppose I may write to Lord Blanquière again at once. This day fortnight leaves quite little enough time on our hands."

That day fortnight Diana and Hogan were married.

Lord Blanquière wrote, after some months' delay, to say that an old friend of his, the governor of one of the South Sea Islands, who had been home on leave for a year, required a secretary, and that he would recommend Hogan to him in that capacity. The salary was small—three hun-

dred a year; and he could offer no prospect of promotion. The secretary would have to reside permanently at Honolulu.

Miserable as this prospect was, Diana was glad to accept it. Her mother bid them adieu with more relief than sorrow. Her son-in-law had not turned out well. The Bragintons had terrible stories to tell of him. The idle time of an unemployed man is seldom too well spent; and for Hogan, who, since his marriage, had become perfectly reckless, a complete change of scene and occupation was necessary.

Mrs. Bursford returned to Dublin, to a solitary, lonely life. She brought Jervis home with her, thinking that the prodigal might repent and be a comfort to her old age; but she was soon obliged to send him back to Monaco, or whatever foreign haunt the gentleman most favoured. Dorothy O'Hegarty is very kind to her; and although the old woman is obliged to live in lodgings, she manages to assemble her friends round her again. For their delectation she makes the best of the accounts from Honolulu. She decries "mixed marriages" as bitterly as the Cardinal himself; and Dorothy, whose dear nephew Dermot is married to a Roman Catholic, is obliged to take up the cudgels in their defence, declaring, with perfect truth, that a happier couple than Mr. and Mrs. Dermot does not exist.

Dicky Davoren never came back. He left his ship at Rio Janeiro, where he obtained a situation in a merchant's office. Mrs. Dermot Blake hears good accounts of him from time to time. His friend Tad Griffiths was disappointed in his expectations. His father declined to buy him out a second time; and the young gentleman is now serving at the Cape of Good Hope. Mr. Orpen passed his examinations with credit, and took Orders the other day. Gagan is an M.D., and is studying for India. Miss O'Hegarty and Peter keep house together. The Dermot Blakes flatly refused to avail themselves of his invaluable services as major domo, and the old lady has, made up her mind that if Peter left her she would miss him so much that it mightn't be good for her. She takes periodical flights to Blakestown, where Dermot and Nellie are delighted to have her. They seldom come up to town. Nellie's father is married again; and, except Dorothy, she has no ties in Dublin. Besides, Dermot hates town; and she is only happy where he is.

FINIS.