

VOLUME III

CHAPTER 14

MISS DOROTHY O'HEGARTY was sitting with Nellie one fine September afternoon in the drawing-room at Green Lanes. The French window, which led into the garden, was open; and the relics of an afternoon tea were scattered about. Miss O'Hegarty was comfortably disposed in an easy-chair, tatting. Nellie, seated on a low chair beside her, her chin resting in the palm of one hand, was gazing dreamily down the garden; where Dermot Blake and Dicky were smoking in the espalier walk. Between them and her lay the flower-garden, all ablaze with scarlet and yellow; standard roses, now bearing their second crop, climbing tea-roses and jessamine, in full blossom, scented the air deliciously; the bees were at work still in the beds of mignonette, and brown and scarlet butterflies flitted to and fro. The peach-apples, dead ripe, showed their scarlet and yellow cheeks on the boughs; plums covered with purple down, and apricots, sweltered on the red-brick walls. Everything was ripe: the flowers, for all their bloom, had the parched look that tells of coming decay; and every breath of air scattered rose-leaves and little jessamine stars on the turf.

Nellie was looking pale and languid; her lips trembled every now and again, and her eyebrows were drawn up fretfully. She sat quiet and silent, apparently listening to Dorothy's never-ending stream of talk; in reality her thoughts were far away.

"Two, six, pearl," began Dorothy, ticking off the number of stitches with a contented nod. Then, taking up evidently some previously discussed topic, "I do wonder how Diana can be such a fool!"

Up went Nellie's arms over her head, which she laid back on her joined hands; and an expression of impatience, that was almost pain, contracted her brow. Not a word did she say.

“Idiot of a woman! She *has* three thousand pounds. People call it five, and no doubt this Mr. Hogan thinks it is that; and it is that he’s after, of course—the fellow. I have no doubt Emily Bursford is glad of anybody for her. She has had her share of trouble with her family. The sons were dreadful—dreadful scamps; one of them married some creature, and is obliged to live out of society—in New Zealand somewhere. Oh no!” Miss Dorothy continued, with a shake of her head that nearly displaced her spectacles, “I don’t think the young man is getting at all such a catch as he imagines—at all. Then one died. People said he was the steady man of the family; but anyhow, he *died*.” Dorothy said this in a dubious tone, as if the fact of dying was damaging *per se*, and must be held to be incriminating, as no proof to the contrary had been lodged. Then there’s Jervis to the good yet; and a torture he is, too.”

Had Nellie been listening, she would have been surprised at this transition from the earlier views of the matter held by Dorothy. When the first news of Diana’s engagement had reached the Fitzgerald Place *coterie*, surprise and indignation at the *mésalliance* had been the order of the day. But now the reaction—the inevitable reaction—had set in. Diana was going about Dublin with all the airs and graces of a *fiancée* desirous to make the most of her position, and showing thereby that she considered herself in no way to be making a bad match. This glaring defiance of law and order was not to be put up with; so public opinion veered round to the gentleman’s side. All the disadvantages of the Bursford family were held up in a strong light. Drelincourt’s, Hutchinson’s, and Jervis’s misdeeds were raked up; Monsignor Bursford, the pervert; Diana’s age: nothing was left undone; and for a week or two it might be thought that the only adequate expression of her friends’ sentiments would be a round-robin of condolence with O’Rooney Hogan, M.P.

“I wonder what her mother will do now? She’ll have to give up her house. I suppose *they* will be living in London. Diana need not imagine he’ll be taken up by people here. London will be the most convenient for him, and of course Diana will live there.”

Nellie was biting her lips hard. Her elbows were taken down now, and her hands were clasped tight together in her lap.

“The way those Bursfords cleared off out of Dublin last spring,” Dorothy went on like a musical-box wound up, “not a bit of me could guess why: Emily was that close over it. Blanche Braginton wasn’t long finding

it all out, though. I daresay Blanche wishes she were as comfortably settled with that old widower—the widow man, as Peter calls him——”

But Dorothy was speaking to the empty air now. Nellie had raised herself lightly from the low chair, and had glided through the open window. Dermot Blake, who seemed to have been watching her, raised his chin above the top of an intervening apple tree, and cast a glance of invitation towards her; but Nellie did not see, and passed, unheeding, round the corner of the house, and, lifting the latch of a green door, entered the poultry-yard.

The hens lay meditatively in holes which they had rooted under the sunniest wall, basking in the warmth, and scratching up clouds of dust. They barely unclosed one eye apiece to view the intruder. Their lord and master, perched on the side of a water-tub, pruned his feathers with dignified indifference. The pigeons, who were busy poaching in the food pans, spread their wings and flew to the roof of the woodhouse, impatiently walking up and down the sloping tiles, and watching with their cunning yellow eyes for her disappearance. The terrier rushed at break-neck speed out of his barrel, where he had been sheltering from the sun; and mounting on his short hind-legs, begged to be released.

Nellie saw nothing. She brushed past the water-tub, almost upsetting chanticleer, and into the woodhouse, latching the door after her. And there, amongst billets of wood, garden baskets, tools, and bunches of dried herbs and roots, she sat down on a block and began to sob. The storm had been gathering some time, and it had now burst. For a minute or two she was carried away by its vehemence.

Suddenly a laugh reached her ears from the garden. It was Dermot's laugh,—deep-chested and wholesome, like the bay of a great Newfoundland dog. She started up, remembering she would have to meet him again. She dried her eyes, and opened a little window hidden behind some bushes, to let in the air on her hot cheeks and brow. “Only a month ago!” she thought, as she called to mind the day at Kingstown—standing with him at the water's edge, the little weak ripples of the ebb-tide breaking among the seaweed at their feet. She almost saw him as he looked into her eyes when asking her for that strange promise. “Believe nothing: trust me, Nellie.” She could hear the tones of his voice. She could see the bay lying calm and white under the August sun; and the salt acrid smell of the seaweed seemed to come back to her. And now! Could it be a dream? Diana Bursford was again in Dub-

lin, and engaged to be his wife. "Wearing a ring, too," as Dermot Blake had said, in corroboration of Dorothy's intelligence; and Dermot had laughed as he had said it—indicating to Nellie, with a gesture of his brown hand, the engaged finger. He had been watching her closely, too, while Dorothy had been telling this great piece of news. What could he have meant by it? It was very impertinent of him, thought Nellie; and she pushed aside the currant bush that was growing before the window, and peeped out at Dermot striding up and down the walk. She looked from his huge shoulders and brown, manly face to Dicky, pale and care-worn and more haggard to-day than ever; and another shadow crossed her face. Dermot seemed in great spirits, laughing and stalking up and down the walk, on the right-hand side, where the border of lemon-thyme was just where Hogan had walked with her that April day. Ah, how long ago! How old it seemed now! She half closed her eyes, dreamily. The soft moist fragrance of the April flowers, violet and narcissus,—the little drops nestling in the cups of the blossoms, and the low, earnest voice that stole away her heart,—all came back to her. Then an angry feeling rose in her. She put back the tears gathering in her eyes, and bit her lips, summoning pride to her aid.

She closed the little window gently. Not so gently that the sound did not reach the quick ear of Dermot Blake, who had not hunted with the Red Indians without learning some of their guile. He threw away his cigar, and, crossing the flower-beds with great steps, entered the poultry-yard as Nellie was coming out of the wood-house. Away flew the pigeons to the housetop; the hens, roused from their siesta, clucked nervously; chanticleer flew from the water-tub to the top of the barrel; and the terrier, advancing as far as his chain would let him, snuffed and fawned to the new-comer.

"Well, Mr. Blake?" said Nellie, shutting the woodhouse door, and meeting the shrewd, kindly glance of his eyes with one half-veiled and timorous, "How do you come here?"

Dermot Blake mounted one foot on the edge of the tub, and leaning his elbow on his knee, stroked his long beard thoughtfully for a moment.

"Miss Nellie!" said he, then; "tell me—is it in there that your hens lay their eggs, eh?"

"They do sometimes," she answered evasively, and making a move to pass him; but he caught her by the arm, and turned her round. "Look at me, Miss Nell; you've been crying."

“Well, and—and—if I have, Mr. Blake?” flushing red, and, with a poor attempt at dignity, trying to meet his eyes, which, no longer laughing, but with something of sternness and sadness in their depths, were bent upon her face.

“If you have?” he repeated,—“if you have—wouldn’t you tell me why, Nell—eh? Nell, wouldn’t you?” He still held her, waiting for an answer.

“No,” she replied brusquely, and with a tremor of her lips that boded a fresh outburst. He let go her arm suddenly, and turned away. Nellie, with a feeling of relief, crossed the yard and opened the door. As she drew it to after her, she looked back shyly towards where he was standing. He was lighting a fresh cigar; Fly, the terrier, rolling in an ecstasy of pleading at his feet.

“Where on earth did you disappear to, child?” asked Miss O’Hegarty, when Nellie returned to her seat beside her. “I was wanting to ask you about Dicky. What is wrong with him—he looks so wretchedly?”

“He does, indeed,” said Nellie. “I can’t understand it.”

“I think, really,” said Dorothy, “he’s given too much money to spend. That must be it. I declare one doesn’t know what is coming over young people nowadays at all. There’s Jasper Gore at Oxford; his aunt has been telling me he has gone through every farthing of his money. The luxury of his rooms—pictures, and china, and all the rest of it—was scandalous. His cousin did the same; and Dermot found him working on a railway in California. Not much pictures and china has he there. Everybody is gone mad, I declare. People old enough to know better doing the same thing. Look at Diana Bursford, now. There, I’ve dropped a stitch—must go back. See, Nellie dear. Nellie, you don’t hear me: go and call Dermot—we must go. No, I won’t go into the garden: it’s too hot. Just gather me a flower or two, will you, and tell him to come?”

Seeing Nellie busy with her scissors among the flower-beds, Dermot advanced to help her.

“Are you cutting flowers for us?” asked he, reaching down a spray of roses high over her head. “What’s the use, though, ma’am? Are we not going to Blakestown to-morrow?”

“Saturday, Dermot dear,” cried Miss Dorothy from the window in answer. “I could not be ready any sooner.”

“Grant me patience; I won’t have a bird left. I’ll go on by myself to-morrow, and you can come after.”

But this Dorothy would not hear of. She had no notion of missing the *éclat* of the triumphant entry of this wandering heir into his seignorial demesne; in fact, the reason of the delay was that she had ordered a special gown for the occasion. So she advanced her head as far as she could without getting out of her chair, and cried shrilly,—

“Now, Dermot, how can you think of it? Blakestown won’t be ready, it won’t; and we must wait now till Saturday. Nellie, you’ll be over the day after to-morrow, won’t you?”

“Ha! Then I won’t go to-morrow,” said Dermot, in a voice meant for Nellie’s ear alone. “I mean to find out what those tears were for.”

“Ah! because you are not going till Saturday.”

“That’s nice and complimentary, by Jove —isn’t it? See now: tell me what sort of roses these are.”

“Tea-roses.”

“Take them, my dear: tea is good for the eyes,” said he, with a meaning glance at hers.

“I wish you were in Blakestown, with all my heart.”

“You can’t mean it!” Then changing his bantering tone, “Nell! Nell! I say!”

“What do you say, Mr. Blake?”

“Give us that little rosebud. Just that one, now.”

“No!”

“You won’t! Give a fellow that little bib of forget-me-not. Nellie, I say, if you give *me* a bit of forget-me-not, I’ll keep it.” And Dermot accented the *me* emphatically, watching poor Nellie’s face the while with mischievous eyes.

An indignant glance was all he got. She hastened back to Dorothy, tying the bouquet as she went with trembling hands.

Dorothy and her nephew walked down together to the station. “Poor old Di.!” said he, in answer to some remark of his aunt’s; “she’s a deal too good for that fellow—a deal too good.” He laughed as he spoke, though his tone was pitying.

“Humph!” grunted Miss O’Hegarty dubiously; “she hasn’t so much——”

“Ah! no matter. This fellow and that Saltasche, the runaway stock-jobber, always hunted in couples. And—ah—there was some talk going about him in London, then, a while back. May not be true at all,” he added hastily; “but Saltasche was an unfortunate connection. Yes, indeed, Di.’s too good for him—quite too good for him.”