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Chapter 33 - Seeds Of The Future (Third Sowing)

AFTER a new and attentive reading of Anne's letter to Geoffrey, and of Geoffrey's letter to Anne, Bishopriggs laid down comfortably under a tree, and set himself the task of seeing his position plainly as it was at that moment.

The profitable disposal of the correspondence to Blanche was no longer among the possibilities involved in the case. As for treating with Sir Patrick, Bishopriggs determined to keep equally dear of the Cowgate, Edinburgh, and of Mrs. Inchbare's inn, so long as there was the faintest chance of his pushing his own interests in any other quarter. No person living would be capable of so certainly extracting the correspondence from him, on such ruinously cheap terms as his old master. "I'll no' put myself under Sir Patrick's thumb," thought Bishopriggs, "till I've gane my ain rounds among the lave o' them first."

Rendered into intelligible English, this resolution pledged him to hold no communication with Sir Patrick--until he had first tested his success in negotiating with other persons, who might be equally interested in getting possession of the correspondence, and more liberal in giving hush-money to the thief who had stolen it.

Who were the "other persons" at his disposal, under these circumstances?

He had only to recall the conversation which he had overheard between Lady Lundie and Mrs. Delamayn to arrive at the discovery of one person, to begin with, who was directly interested in getting possession of his own letter. Mr. Geoffrey Delamayn was in a fair way of being married to a lady named Mrs. Glenarm. And here was this same Mr. Geoffrey Delamayn in matrimonial correspondence, little more than a fortnight since, with another lady--who signed herself "Anne Silvester."

Whatever his position between the two women might be, his interest in possessing himself of the correspondence was plain beyond all doubt. It was equally clear that the first thing to be done by Bishopriggs was to find the means of obtaining a personal interview with him. If the interview led to nothing else, it would decide one important question which still remained to be solved. The lady whom Bishopriggs had waited on at Craig Fernie might well be "Anne Silvester." Was Mr. Geoffrey Delamayn, in that case, the gentleman who had passed as her husband at the inn?

Bishopriggs rose to his gouty feet with all possible alacrity, and hobbled away to make the necessary inquiries, addressing himself, not to the men-servants at the dinner-table, who would be sure to insist on his joining them, but to the women-servants left in charge of the empty house.

He easily obtained the necessary directions for finding the cottage. But he was warned that Mr. Geoffrey Delamayn's trainer allowed nobody to see his patron at exercise, and that he would certainly be ordered off again the moment he appeared on the scene.

Bearing this caution in mind, Bishopriggs made a circuit, on reaching the open ground, so as to approach the cottage at the back, under shelter of the trees behind it. One look at Mr. Geoffrey Delamayn was all that he wanted in the first instance. They were welcome to order him off again, as long as he obtained that.

He was still hesitating at the outer line of the trees, when he heard a loud, imperative voice, calling from the front of the cottage, "Now, Mr. Geoffrey! Time's up!" Another voice answered, "All right!" and, after an interval, Geoffrey Delamayn appeared on the open ground, proceeding to the point from which he was accustomed to walk his measured mile.

Advancing a few steps to look at his man more closely, Bishopriggs was instantly detected by the quick eye of the trainer. "Hullo!" cried Perry, "what do you want here?" Bishopriggs opened his lips to make an excuse. "Who the devil are you?" roared Geoffrey. The trainer answered the question out of the resources of his own experience. "A spy, Sir--sent to time you at your work." Geoffrey lifted his mighty fist, and sprang forward a step. Perry held his patron back. "You can't do that, Sir," he said; "the man's too old. No fear of his turning up again--you've scared him out of his wits." The statement was strictly true. The terror of Bishopriggs at the sight of Geoffrey's fist restored to him the activity of his youth. He ran for the first time for twenty years; and only stopped to remember his infirmities, and to catch his breath, when he was out of sight of the cottage, among the trees.

He sat down to rest and recover himself, with the comforting inner conviction that, in one respect at least, he had gained his point. The furious savage, with the eyes that darted fire and the fist that threatened destruction, was a total stranger to him. In other words, not the man who had passed as the lady's husband at the inn.

At the same time it was equally certain that he was the man involved in the compromising correspondence which Bishopriggs possessed. To appeal, however, to his interest in obtaining the letter was entirely incompatible (after the recent exhibition of his fist) with the strong regard which Bishopriggs felt for his own personal security. There was no alternative now but to open negotiations with the one other person concerned in the matter (fortunately, on this occasion, a person of the gentler sex), who was actually within reach. Mrs. Glenarm was at Swanhaven. She had a direct interest in clearing up the question of a prior claim to Mr. Geoffrey Delamayn on the part of another woman. And she could only do that by getting the correspondence into her own hands.

"Praise Providence for a' its mercies!" said Bishopriggs, getting on his feet again. "I've got twa strings, as they say, to my boo. I trow the woman's the canny string o' the twa--and we'll een try the twanging of her."

He set forth on his road back again, to search among the company at the lake for Mrs. Glenarm.

The dance had reached its climax of animation when Bishopriggs reappeared on the scene of his duties; and the ranks of the company had been recruited, in his absence, by the very person whom it was now his foremost object to approach.

Receiving, with supple submission, a reprimand for his prolonged absence from the chief of the servants, Bishopriggs--keeping his one observant eye carefully on the look-out--busied himself in promoting the circulation of ices and cool drinks.

While he was thus occupied, his attention was attracted by two persons who, in very different ways, stood out prominently as marked characters among the rank and file of the guests.

The first person, a vivacious, irascible old gentleman, who persisted in treating the undeniable fact of his age on the footing of a scandalous false report set afloat by Time. He was superbly strapped and padded. His hair, his teeth, and his complexion were triumphs of artificial youth. When he was not occupied among the youngest women present--which was very seldom--he attached himself exclusively to the youngest men. He insisted on joining every dance. Twice he measured his length upon the grass, but nothing daunted him. He was waltzing again, with another young woman, at the next dance, as if nothing had happened. Inquiring who this effervescent old gentleman might be, Bishopriggs discovered that he was a retired officer in the navy; commonly known (among his inferiors) as "The Tartar;" more formally described in society as Captain Newenden, the last male representative of one of the oldest families in England.

The second person, who appeared to occupy a position of distinction at the dance in the glade, was a lady.

To the eye of Bishopriggs, she was a miracle of beauty, with a small fortune for a poor man carried about her in silk, lace, and jewelry. No woman present was the object of such special attention among the men as this fascinating and priceless creature. She sat fanning herself with a matchless work of art (supposed to be a handkerchief) representing an island of cambric in the midst of an ocean of lace. She was surrounded by a little court of admirers, who fetched and carried at her slightest nod, like well-trained dogs. Sometimes they brought refreshments, which she had asked for, only to decline taking them when they came. Sometimes they brought information of what was going on among the dancers, which the lady had been eager to receive when they went away, and in which she had ceased to feel the smallest interest when they came back. Every body burst into ejaculations of distress when she was asked to account for her absence from the dinner, and answered, "My poor nerves." Every body said, "What should we have done without you!"--when she doubted if she had done wisely in joining the party at all. Inquiring who this favored lady might be, Bishopriggs discovered that she was the niece of the indomitable old gentleman who _would_ dance--or, more plainly still, no less a person than his contemplated customer, Mrs. Glenarm.

With all his enormous assurance Bishopriggs was daunted when he found himself facing the question of what he was to do next.

To open negotiations with Mrs. Glenarm, under present circumstances, was, for a man in his position, simply impossible. But, apart from this, the prospect of profitably addressing himself to that lady in the future was, to say the least of it, beset with difficulties of no common kind.

Supposing the means of disclosing Geoffrey's position to her to be found--what would she do, when she received her warning? She would in all probability apply to one of the two formidable men, both of whom were interested in the matter. If she went straight to the man accused of attempting to marry her, at a time when he was already engaged to another woman--Bishopriggs would find himself confronted with the owner of that terrible fist, which had justly terrified him even on a distant and cursory view. If, on the other hand she placed her interests in the care of her uncle--Bishopriggs had only to look at the captain, and to calculate his chance of imposing terms on a man who owed Life a bill of more than sixty years' date, and who openly defied time to recover the debt.

With these serious obstacles standing in the way, what was to be done? The only alternative left was to approach Mrs. Glenarm under shelter of the dark.

Reaching this conclusion, Bishopriggs decided to ascertain from the servants what the lady's future movements might be; and, thus informed, to startle her by anonymous warnings, conveyed through the post, and claiming their answer through the advertising channel of a newspaper. Here was the certainty of alarming her, coupled with the certainty of safety to himself! Little did Mrs. Glenarm dream, when she capriciously stopped a servant going by with some glasses of lemonade, that the wretched old creature who offered the tray contemplated corresponding with her before the week was out, in the double character of her "Well-Wisher" and her "True Friend."

The evening advanced. The shadows lengthened. The waters of the lake grew pitchy black. The gliding of the ghostly swans became rare and more rare. The elders of the party thought of the drive home. The juniors (excepting Captain Newenden) began to flag at the dance. Little by little the comfortable attractions of the house--tea, coffee, and candle-light in snug rooms--resumed their influence. The guests abandoned the glade; and the fingers and lungs of the musicians rested at last.

Lady Lundie and her party were the first to send for the carriage and say farewell; the break-up of the household at Windygates on the next day, and the journey south, being sufficient apologies for setting the example of retreat. In an hour more the only visitors left were the guests staying at Swanhaven Lodge.

The company gone, the hired waiters from Kirkandrew were paid and dismissed.

On the journey back the silence of Bishopriggs created some surprise among his comrades.

"I've got my ain concerns. to think of," was the only answer he vouchsafed to the remonstrances addressed to him. The "concerns" alluded to, comprehended, among other things, changes of plan, his departure from Kirkandrew the next day--with a reference, in case of inquiries, to his convenient friend at the Cowgate, Edinburgh. His actual destination--to be kept a secret from every body--was Perth. The neighborhood of this town--as stated on the authority of her own maid--was the part of Scotland to which the rich widow contemplated removing when she left Swanhaven in two days' time. At Perth, Bishopriggs knew of more than one place in which he could get temporary employment--and at Perth he determined to make his first anonymous advances to Mrs. Glenarm.

The remainder of the evening passed quietly enough at the Lodge.

The guests were sleepy and dull after the excitement of the day. Mrs. Glenarm retired early. At eleven o'clock Julius Delamayn was the only person left up in the house. He was understood to be in his study, preparing an address to the electors, based on instructions sent from London by his father. He was actually occupied in the music-room--now that there was nobody to discover him--playing exercises softly on his beloved violin.

At the trainer's cottage a trifling incident occurred, that night, which afforded materials for a note in Perry's professional diary.

Geoffrey had sustained the later trial of walking for a given time and distance, at his full speed, without showing any of those symptoms of exhaustion which had followed the more serious experiment of running, to which he had been subjected earlier in the day. Perry, honestly bent--though he had privately hedged his own bets--on doing his best to bring his man in good order to the post on the day of the race, had forbidden Geoffrey to pay his evening visit to the house, and had sent him to bed earlier than usual. The trainer was alone, looking over his own written rules, and considering what modifications he should introduce into the diet and exercises of the next day, when he was startled by a sound of groaning from the bedroom in which his patron lay asleep.

He went in, and found Geoffrey rolling to and fro on the pillow, with his face contorted, with his hands clenched, and with the perspiration standing thick on his forehead--suffering evidently under the nervous oppression produced by the phantom-terrors of a dream.

Perry spoke to him, and pulled him up in the bed. He woke with a scream. He stared at his trainer in vacant terror, and spoke to his trainer in wild words. "What are your horrid eyes looking at over my shoulder?" he cried out. "Go to the devil--and take your infernal slate with you!" Perry spoke to him once more. "You've been dreaming of somebody, Mr. Delamayn. What's to do about a slate?" Geoffrey looked eagerly round the room, and heaved a heavy breath of relief. "I could have sworn she was staring at me over the dwarf pear-trees," he said. "All right, I know where I am now." Perry (attributing the dream to nothing more important than a passing indigestion) administered some brandy and water, and left him to drop off again to sleep. He fretfully forbade the extinguishing of the light. "Afraid of the dark?" said Perry, with a laugh. No. He was afraid of dreaming again of the dumb cook at Windygates House.

