

CHAPTER XXI

THE COLONEL GOES OUT SHOOTING

The next morning was fine and still, one of those lovely autumn days of which we get four or five in the course of a season. After breakfast Harold Quaritch strolled down his garden, stood himself against a gate to the right of Dead Man's Mount, and looked at the scene. All about him, their foliage yellowing to its fall, rose the giant oaks, which were the pride of the country side, and so quiet was the air that not a leaf upon them stirred. The only sounds that reached his ears were the tappings of the nut-hutches as they sought their food in the rough crannies of the bark, and the occasional falling of a rich ripe acorn from its lofty place on to the frosted grass beneath. The sunshine shone bright, but with a chastened heat, the squirrels scrambled up the oaks, and high in the blue air the rooks pursued their path. It was a beautiful morning, for summer is never more sweet than on its death-bed, and yet it filled him with solemn thoughts. How many autumns had those old trees seen, and how many would they still see, long after his eyes had lost their sight! And if they were old, how old was Dead Man's Mount there to his left! Old, indeed! for he had discovered it was mentioned in Doomday Book and by that name. And what was it--a boundary hill, a natural formation, or, as its name implied, a funeral barrow? He had half a mind to dig one day and find out, that is if he could get anybody to dig with him, for the people about Honham were so firmly convinced

that Dead Man's Mount was haunted, a reputation which it had owned from time immemorial, that nothing would have persuaded them to touch it.

He contemplated the great mound carefully without coming to any conclusion, and then looked at his watch. It was a quarter to ten, time for him to start for the Castle for his day's shooting. So he got his gun and cartridges, and in due course arrived at the Castle, to find George and several myrmidons, in the shape of beaters and boys, already standing in the yard.

"Please, Colonel, the Squire hopes you'll go in and have a glass of summut before you start," said George; so accordingly he went, not to "have a glass of summut," but on the chance of seeing Ida. In the vestibule he found the old gentleman busily engaged in writing an enormous letter.

"Hullo, Colonel," he halloaed, without getting up, "glad to see you. Excuse me for a few moments, will you, I want to get this off my mind. Ida! Ida! Ida!" he shouted, "here's Colonel Quaritch."

"Good gracious, father," said that young lady, arriving in a hurry, "you are bringing the house down," and then she turned round and greeted Harold. It was the first time they had met since the eventful evening described a chapter or two back, so the occasion might be considered a little awkward; at any rate he felt it so.

"How do you do, Colonel Quaritch?" she said quite simply, giving him her hand. There was nothing in the words, and yet he felt that he was very welcome. For when a woman really loves a man there is about her an atmosphere of softness and tender meaning which can scarcely be mistaken. Sometimes it is only perceptible to the favoured individual himself, but more generally is to be discerned by any person of ordinary shrewdness. A very short course of observation in general society will convince the reader of the justice of this observation, and when once he gets to know the signs of the weather he will probably light upon more affairs of the heart than were ever meant for his investigation.

This softness, or atmospheric influence, or subdued glow of affection radiating from a light within, was clearly enough visible in Ida that morning, and certainly it made our friend the Colonel unspeakably happy to see it.

"Are you fond of shooting?" she asked presently.

"Yes, very, and have been all my life."

"Are you a good shot?" she asked again.

"I call that a rude question," he answered smiling.

"Yes, it is, but I want to know."

"Well," said Harold, "I suppose that I am pretty fair, that is at rough shooting; I never had much practice at driven birds and that kind of sport."

"I am glad of it."

"Why, it does not much matter. One goes out shooting for the sport of the thing."

"Yes, I know, but Mr. Edward Cossey," and she shrank visibly as she uttered the name, "is coming, and he is a /very/ good shot and /very/ conceited about it. I want you to beat him if you can--will you try?"

"Well," said Harold, "I don't at all like shooting against a man. It is not sportsmanlike, you know; and, besides, if Mr. Cossey is a crack shot, I daresay that I shall be nowhere; but I will shoot as well as I can."

"Do you know, it is very feminine, but I would give anything to see you beat him?" and she nodded and laughed, whereupon Harold Quaritch vowed in his heart that if it in him lay he would not disappoint her.

At that moment Edward Cossey's fast trotting horse drew up at the door with a prodigious crunching of gravel, and Edward himself entered,

looking very handsome and rather pale. He was admirably dressed, that is to say, his shooting clothes were beautifully made and very new-looking, and so were his boots, and so was his hat, and so were his hammerless guns, of which he brought a pair. There exists a certain class of sportsmen who always appear to have just walked out of a sporting tailor's shop, and to this class Edward Cossey belonged.

Everything about him was of the best and newest and most expensive kind possible; even his guns were just down from a famous maker, and the best that could be had for love or money, having cost exactly a hundred and forty guineas the pair. Indeed, he presented a curious contrast to his rival. The Colonel had certainly nothing new-looking about /him/; an old tweed coat, an old hat, with a piece of gut still twined round it, a sadly frayed bag full of brown cartridges, and, last of all, an old gun with the brown worn off the barrels, original cost, 17 pounds 10s. And yet there was no possibility of making any mistake as to which of the two looked more of a gentleman, or, indeed, more of a sportsman.

Edward Cossey shook hands with Ida, but when the Colonel was advancing to give him his hand, he turned and spoke to the Squire, who had at length finished his letter, so that no greeting was passed between them. At the time Harold did not know if this move was or was not accidental.

Presently they started, Edward Cossey attended by his man with the second gun.

"Hullo! Cossey," sang out the Squire after him, "it isn't any use bringing your two guns for this sort of work. I don't preserve much here, you know, at least not now. You will only get a dozen cock pheasants and a few brace of partridges."

"Oh, thank you," he answered, "I always like to have a second gun in case I should want it. It's no trouble, you know."

"All right," said the Squire. "Ida and I will come down with the luncheon to the grove. Good-bye."

After crossing the moat, Edward Cossey walked by himself, followed by his man and a very fine retriever, and the Colonel talked to George, who was informing him that Mr. Cossey was "a pretty shot, he wore, but rather snappy over it," till they came to a field of white turnips.

"Now, gentlemen, if you please," said George, "we will walk through these here turnips. I put two coveys of birds in here myself, and it's rare good 'lay' for them; so I think that we had better see if they will let us come nigh them."

Accordingly they started down the field, the Colonel on the right, George in the middle and Edward Cossey on the left.

Before they had gone ten yards, an old Frenchman got up in the front

of one of the beaters and wheeled round past Edward, who cut him over in first-rate style.

From that one bird the Colonel could see that the man was a quick and clever shot. Presently, however, a leash of English birds rose rather awkwardly at about forty paces straight in front of Edward Cossey, and Harold noticed that he left them alone, never attempting to fire at them. In fact he was one of those shooters who never take a hard shot if they can avoid it, being always in terror lest they should miss it and so reduce their average.

Then George, who was a very fair shot of the "poking" order, fired both barrels and got a bird, and Edward Cossey got another. It was not till they were getting to the end of their last beat that Harold found a chance of letting off his gun. Suddenly, however, a brace of old birds sprang up out of the turnips in front of him at about thirty yards as swiftly as though they had been ejected from a mortar, and made off, one to the right and one to the left, both of them rising shots. He got the right-hand bird, and then turning killed the other also, when it was more than fifty yards away.

The Colonel felt satisfied, for the shots were very good. Mr. Cossey opened his eyes and wondered if it was a fluke, and George ejaculated, "Well, that's a master one."

After this they pursued their course, picking up another two brace of

birds on the way to the outlying cover, a wood of about twenty acres through which they were to brush. It was a good holding wood for pheasants, but lay on the outside of the Honham estate, where they were liable to be poached by the farmers whose land marched, so George enjoined them particularly not to let anything go.

Into the details of the sport that followed we need not enter, beyond saying that the Colonel, to his huge delight, never shot better in his life. Indeed, with the exception of one rabbit and hen pheasant that flopped up right beneath his feet, he scarcely missed anything, though he took the shots as they came. Edward Cossey also shot well, and with one exception missed nothing, but then he never took a difficult shot if he could avoid it. The exception was a woodcock which rose in front of George, who was walking down an outside belt with the beaters. He loosed two barrels at it and missed, and on it came among the tree tops, past where Edward Cossey was standing, about half-way down the belt, giving him a difficult chance with the first barrel and a clear one with the second. Bang! bang! and on came the woodcock, now flying low, but at tremendous speed, straight at the Colonel's head, a most puzzling shot. However, he fired, and to his joy (and what joy is there like to the joy of a sportsman who has just killed a woodcock which everybody has been popping at?) down it came with a thump almost at his feet.

This was their last beat before lunch, which was now to be seen approaching down a lane in a donkey cart convoyed by Ida and the

Squire. The latter was advancing in stages of about ten paces, and at every stage he stopped to utter a most fearful roar by way of warning all and sundry that they were not to shoot in his direction. Edward gave his gun to his bearer and at once walked off to join them, but the Colonel went with George to look after two running cocks which he had down, for he was an old-fashioned sportsman, and hated not picking up his game. After some difficulty they found one of the cocks in the hedgerow, but the other they could not find, so reluctantly they gave up the search. When they got to the lane they found the luncheon ready, while one of the beaters was laying out the game for the Squire to inspect. There were fourteen pheasants, four brace and a half of partridges, a hare, three rabbits, and a woodcock.

"Hullo," said the Squire, "who shot the woodcock?"

"Well, sir," said George, "we all had a pull at him, but the Colonel wiped our eyes."

"Oh, Mr. Cossey," said Ida, in affected surprise, "why, I thought you never missed /anything/."

"Everybody misses sometimes," answered that gentleman, looking uncommonly sulky. "I shall do better this afternoon when it comes to the driven partridges."

"I don't believe you will," went on Ida, laughing maliciously. "I bet

you a pair of gloves that Colonel Quaritch will shoot more driven partridges than you do."

"Done," said Edward Cossey sharply.

"Now, do you hear that, Colonel Quaritch?" went on Ida. "I have bet Mr. Cossey a pair of gloves that you will kill more partridges this afternoon than he will, so I hope you won't make me lose them."

"Goodness gracious," said the Colonel, in much alarm. "Why, the last partridge-driving that I had was on the slopes of some mountains in Afghanistan. I daresay that I shan't hit anything. Besides," he said with some irritation, "I don't like being set up to shoot against people."

"Oh, of course," said Edward loftily, "if Colonel Quaritch does not like to take it up there's an end of it."

"Well," said the Colonel, "if you put it in that way I don't mind trying, but I have only one gun and you have two."

"Oh, that will be all right," said Ida to the Colonel. "You shall have George's gun; he never tries to shoot when they drive partridges, because he cannot hit them. He goes with the beaters. It is a very good gun."

The Colonel took up the gun and examined it. It was of about the same bend and length as his own, but of a better quality, having once been the property of James de la Molle.

"Yes," he said, "but then I haven't got a loader."

"Never mind. I'll do that, I know all about it. I often used to hold my brother's second gun when we drove partridges, because he said I was so much quicker than the men. Look," and she took the gun and rested one knee on the turf; "first position, second position, third position. We used to have regular drills at it," and she sighed.

The Colonel laughed heartily, for it was a curious thing to see this stately woman handling a gun with all the skill and quickness of a practised shot. Besides, as the loader idea involved a whole afternoon of Ida's society he certainly was not inclined to negative it. But Edward Cossey did not smile; on the contrary he positively scowled with jealousy, and was about to make some remark when Ida held up her finger.

"Hush," she said, "here comes my father" (the Squire had been counting the game); "he hates bets, so you mustn't say anything about our match."

Luncheon went off pretty well, though Edward Cossey did not contribute much to the general conversation. When it was done the Squire

announced that he was going to walk to the other end of the estate,
whereon Ida said that she should stop and see something of the
shooting, and the fun began.