

CHAPTER XXII

THE END OF THE MATCH

They began the afternoon with several small drives, but on the whole the birds did very badly. They broke back, went off to one side or the other, and generally misbehaved themselves. In the first drive the Colonel and Edward Cossey got a bird each. In the second drive the latter got three birds, firing five shots, and his antagonist only got a hare and a pheasant that jumped out of a ditch, neither of which, of course, counted anything. Only one brace of birds came his way at all, but if the truth must be told, he was talking to Ida at the moment and did not see them till too late.

Then came a longer drive, when the birds were pretty plentiful. The Colonel got one, a low-flying Frenchman, which he killed as he topped the fence, and after that for the life of him he could not touch a feather. Every sportsman knows what a fatal thing it is to begin to miss and then get nervous, and that was what happened to the Colonel. Continually there came distant cries of "/Mark! mark over!/" followed by the apparition of half-a-dozen brown balls showing clearly against the grey autumn sky and sweeping down towards him like lightning. /Whizz/ in front, overhead and behind; bang, bang; bang again with the second gun, and they were away--vanished, gone, leaving nothing but a memory behind them.

The Colonel swore beneath his breath, and Ida kneeling at his side, sighed audibly; but it was of no use, and presently the drive was done, and there he was with one wretched French partridge to show for it.

Ida said nothing, but she looked volumes, and if ever a man felt humiliated, Harold Quaritch was that man. She had set her heart upon his winning the match, and he was making an exhibition of himself that might have caused a schoolboy to blush.

Only Edward Cossey smiled grimly as he told his bearer to give the two and a half brace which he had shot to George.

"Last drive this next, gentlemen," said that universal functionary as he surveyed the Colonel's one Frenchman, and then glancing sadly at the tell-tale pile of empty cartridge cases, added, "You'll hev to shoot up, Colonel, this time, if you are a-going to win them there gloves for Miss Ida. Mr. Cossey hev knocked up four brace and a half, and you hev only got a brace. Look you here, sir," he went on in a portentous whisper, "keep forrard of them, well forrard, fire ahead, and down they'll come of themselves like. You're a better shot than he is a long way; you could give him 'birds,' sir, that you could, and beat him."

Harold said nothing. He was sorely tempted to make excuses, as any man would have been, and he might with truth have urged that he was not

accustomed to partridge-driving, and that one of the guns was new to him. But he resisted manfully and said never a word.

George placed the two guns, and then went off to join the beaters. It was a capital spot for a drive, for on each side were young larch plantations, sloping down towards them like a V, the guns being at the narrow end and level with the points of the plantations, which were at this spot about a hundred and twenty yards apart. In front was a large stretch of open fields, lying in such a fashion that the birds were bound to fly straight over the guns and between the gap at the end of the V-shaped covers.

They had to wait a long while, for the beat was of considerable extent, and this they did in silence, till presently a couple of single birds appeared coming down the wind like lightning, for a stiffish breeze had sprung up. One went to the left over Edward Cossey's head, and he shot it very neatly, but the other, catching sight of Harold's hat beneath the fence, which was not a high one, swerved and crossed, an almost impossible shot, nearer sixty than fifty yards from him.

"Now," said Ida, and he fired, and to his joy down came the bird with a thud, bounding full two feet into the air with the force of its impact, being indeed shot through the head.

"That's better," said Ida, as she handed him the second gun.

Another moment and a covey came over, high up. He fired both barrels and got a right and left, and snatching the second gun sent another barrel after them, hitting a third bird, which did not fall. And then a noble enthusiasm and certainty possessed him, and he knew that he should miss no more. Nor did he. With two almost impossible exceptions he dropped every bird that drive. But his crowning glory, a thing whereof he still often dreams, was yet to come.

He had killed four brace of partridge and fired eleven times, when at last the beaters made their appearance about two hundred yards away at the further end of rather dirty barley stubble.

"I think that is the lot," he said; "I'm afraid you have lost your gloves, Ida."

Scarcely were the words out of his mouth when there was a yell of "mark!" and a strong covey of birds appeared, swooping down the wind right on to him.

On they came, scattered and rather "stringy." Harold gripped his gun and drew a deep breath, while Ida, kneeling at his side, her lips apart, and her beautiful eyes wide open, watched their advent through a space in the hedge. Lovely enough she looked to charm the heart of any man, if a man out partridge-driving could descend to such frivolity, which we hold to be impossible.

Now is the moment. The leading brace are something over fifty yards away, and he knows full well that if there is to be a chance left for the second gun he must shoot before they are five yards nearer.

"Bang!" down comes the old cock bird; "bang!" and his mate follows him, falling with a smash into the fence.

Quick as light Ida takes the empty gun with one hand, and as he swings round passes him the cocked and loaded one with the other. "Bang!" Another bird topples head first out of the thinned covey. They are nearly sixty yards away now. "Bang!" again, and oh, joy and wonder! the last bird turns right over backwards, and falls dead as a stone some seventy paces from the muzzle of the gun.

He had killed four birds out of a single driven covey, which as shooters well know is a feat not often done even by the best driving shots.

"Bravo!" said Ida, "I was sure that you could shoot if you chose."

"Yes," he answered, "it was pretty good work;" and he commenced collecting the birds, for by this time the beaters were across the field. They were all dead, not a runner in the lot, and there were exactly six brace of them. Just as he picked up the last, George arrived, followed by Edward Cossey.

"Well I niver," said the former, while something resembling a smile stole over his melancholy countenance, "if that bean't the masterest bit of shooting that ever I did see. Lord Walsingham couldn't hardly beat that hisself--fifteen empty cases and twelve birds picked up. Why," and he turned to Edward, "bless me, sir, if I don't believe the Colonel has won them gloves for Miss Ida after all. Let's see, sir, you got two brace this last drive and one the first, and a leash the second, and two brace and a half the third, six and a half brace in all. And the Colonel, yes, he hev seven brace, one bird to the good."

"There, Mr. Cossey," said Ida, smiling sweetly, "I have won my gloves. Mind you don't forget to pay them."

"Oh, I will not forget, Miss de la Molle," said he, smiling also, but not too prettily. "I suppose," he said, addressing the Colonel, "that the last covey twisted up and you browned them."

"No," he answered quietly, "all four were clear shots."

Mr. Cossey smiled again, as he turned away to hide his vexation, an incredulous smile, which somehow sent Harold Quaritch's blood leaping through his veins more quickly than was good for him. Edward Cossey would rather have lost a thousand pounds than that his adversary should have got that extra bird, for not only was he a jealous shot, but he knew perfectly well that Ida was anxious that he should lose,

and desired above all things to see him humiliated. And then he, the smartest shot within ten miles round, to be beaten by a middle-aged soldier shooting with a strange gun, and totally unaccustomed to driven birds! Why, the story would be told over the county; George would see to that. His anger was so great when he thought of it, that afraid of making himself ridiculous, he set off with his bearer towards the Castle without another word, leaving the others to follow.

Ida looked after him and smiled. "He is so conceited," she said; "he cannot bear to be beaten at anything."

"I think that you are rather hard on him," said the Colonel, for the joke had an unpleasant side which jarred upon his taste.

"At any rate," she answered, with a little stamp, "it is not for you to say so. If you disliked him as much as I do you would be hard on him, too. Besides, I daresay that his turn is coming."

The Colonel winced, as well he might, but looking at her handsome face, set just now like steel at the thought of what the future might bring forth, he reflected that if Edward Cossey's turn did come he was by no means sure that the ultimate triumph would rest with him. Ida de la Molle, to whatever extent her sense of honour and money indebtedness might carry her, was no butterfly to be broken on a wheel, but a woman whose dislike and anger, or worse still, whose cold, unvarying disdain, was a thing from which the boldest hearted

man might shrink aghast.

Nothing more was said on the subject, and they began to talk, though somewhat constrainedly, about indifferent matters. They were both aware that it was a farce, and that they were playing a part, for beneath the external ice of formalities the river of their devotion ran strong--whither they knew not. All that had been made clear a few nights back. But what will you have? Necessity over-riding their desires, compelled them along the path of self-denial, and, like wise folk, they recognised the fact: for there is nothing more painful in the world than the outburst of hopeless affection.

And so they talked about painting and shooting and what not, till they reached the grey old Castle towers. Here Harold wanted to bid her good-bye, but she persuaded him to come in and have some tea, saying that her father would like to say good-night to him.

Accordingly he went into the vestibule, where there was a light, for it was getting dusk; and here he found the Squire and Mr. Cossey. As soon as he entered, Edward Cossey rose, said good-night to the Squire and Ida, and then passed towards the door, where the Colonel was standing, rubbing the mud off his shooting boots. As he came, Harold being slightly ashamed of the business of the shooting match, and very sorry to have humiliated a man who prided himself so much upon his skill in a particular branch of sport, held out his hand and said in a friendly tone:

"Good-night, Mr. Cossey. Next time that we are out shooting together I expect I shall be nowhere. It was an awful fluke of mine killing those four birds."

Edward Cossey took no notice of the friendly words or outstretched hand, but came straight on as though he intended to walk past him.

The Colonel was wondering what it was best to do, for he could not mistake the meaning of the oversight, when the Squire, who was sometimes very quick to notice things, spoke in a loud and decided tone.

"Mr. Cossey," he said, "Colonel Quaritch is offering you his hand."

"I observe that he is," he answered, setting his handsome face, "but I do not wish to take Colonel Quaritch's hand."

Then came a moment's silence, which the Squire again broke.

"When a gentleman in my house refuses to take the hand of another gentleman," he said very quietly, "I think that I have a right to ask the reason for his conduct, which, unless that reason is a very sufficient one, is almost as much a slight upon me as upon him."

"I think that Colonel Quaritch must know the reason, and will not

press me to explain," said Edward Cossey.

"I know of no reason," replied the Colonel sternly, "unless indeed it is that I have been so unfortunate as to get the best of Mr. Cossey in a friendly shooting match."

"Colonel Quaritch must know well that this is not the reason to which I allude," said Edward. "If he consults his conscience he will probably discover a better one."

Ida and her father looked at each other in surprise, while the Colonel by a half involuntary movement stepped between his accuser and the door; and Ida noticed that his face was white with anger.

"You have made a very serious implication against me, Mr. Cossey," he said in a cold clear voice. "Before you leave this room you will be so good as to explain it in the presence of those before whom it has been made."

"Certainly, if you wish it," he answered, with something like a sneer. "The reason why I refused to take your hand, Colonel Quaritch, is that you have been guilty of conduct which proves to me that you are not a gentleman, and, therefore, not a person with whom I desire to be on friendly terms. Shall I go on?"

"Most certainly you will go on," answered the Colonel.

"Very well. The conduct to which I refer is that you were once engaged to my aunt, Julia Heston; that within three days of the time of the marriage you deserted and jilted her in a most cruel way, as a consequence of which she went mad, and is to this moment an inmate of an asylum."

Ida gave an exclamation of astonishment, and the Colonel started, while the Squire, looking at him curiously, waited to hear what he had to say.

"It is perfectly true, Mr. Cossey," he answered, "that I was engaged twenty years ago to be married to Miss Julia Heston, though I now for the first time learn that she was your aunt. It is also quite true that that engagement was broken off, under most painful circumstances, within three days of the time fixed for the marriage. What those circumstances were I am not at liberty to say, for the simple reason that I gave my word not to do so; but this I will say, that they were not to my discredit, though you may not be aware of that fact. But as you are one of the family, Mr. Cossey, my tongue is not tied, and I will do myself the honour of calling upon you to-morrow and explaining them to you. After that," he added significantly, "I shall require you to apologise to me as publicly as you have accused me."

"You may require, but whether I shall comply is another matter," said Edward Cossey, and he passed out.

"I am very sorry, Mr. de la Molle," said the Colonel, as soon as he had gone, "more sorry than I can say, that I should have been the cause of this most unpleasant scene. I also feel that I am placed in a very false position, and until I produce Mr. Cossey's written apology, that position must to some extent continue. If I fail to obtain that apology, I shall have to consider what course to take. In the meanwhile I can only ask you to suspend your judgment."