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THE SHOOTING PARTY

SHE got in and put her suit case in the rack, and the brace of pheasants on top of it. Then she sat down in the corner. The train was rattling through the midlands, and the fog, which came in when she opened the door, seemed to enlarge the carriage and set the four travellers apart. Obviously M. M.—those were the initials on the suit case—had been staying the week-end with a shooting party. Obviously, for she was telling over the story now, lying back in her corner. She did not shut her eyes. But clearly she did not see the man opposite, nor the coloured photograph of York Minster. She must have heard, too, what they had been saying. For as she gazed, her lips moved; now and then she smiled. And she was handsome; a cabbage rose; a russet apple; tawny; but scarred on the jaw—the scar lengthened when she smiled. Since she was telling over the story she must have been a guest there, and yet, dressed as she was out of fashion as women dressed, years ago, in pictures, in sporting newspapers, she did not seem exactly a guest, nor yet a maid. Had she had a basket with her she would have been the woman who breeds fox terriers; the owner of the Siamese cat; some one connected with hounds and horses. But she had only a suit case and the pheasants. Somehow, therefore, she must have wormed her way into the room that she was seeing through the stuffing of the carriage, and the man's bald head, and the picture of York Minster. And she must have listened to what they were saying, for now, like somebody imitating the noise that someone else makes, she made a little click at the back of her throat. "Chk." Then she smiled.

"Chk," said Miss Antonia, pinching her glasses on her nose. The damp leaves fell across the long windows of the gallery; one or two stuck, fish shaped, and lay like inlaid brown wood upon the window panes. Then the trees in the Park shivered, and the leaves, flaunting down, seemed to make the shiver visible—the damp brown shiver.

"Chk." Miss Antonia sniffed again, and pecked at the flimsy white stuff that she held in her hands, as a hen pecks nervously rapidly at a piece of white bread.

The wind sighed. The room was draughty. The doors did not fit, nor the windows. Now and then a ripple, like a reptile, ran under the carpet. On the carpet lay panels of green and yellow, where the sun rested, and then the sun moved and pointed a finger as if in mockery at a hole in the carpet and stopped. And then on it went, the sun's feeble but impartial finger, and lay upon the coat of arms over the fireplace—gently illumined—the shield, the pendant grapes, the mermaid, and the spears. Miss Antonia looked up as the light strengthened. Vast lands, so they said, the old people had owned—her forefathers—the Rashleighs. Over there. Up the Amazons. Freebooter. Voyagers. Sacks of emeralds. Nosing round the island. Taking captives. Maidens. There she was, all scales from the tail to the waist. Miss Antonia grinned. Down struck the finger of the sun and her eye went with it. Now it rested on a silver frame; on a photograph; on an egg-shaped baldish head; on a lip that stuck out under the moustache; and the name "Edward" written with a flourish beneath.

"The King . . ." Miss Antonia muttered, turning the film of white upon her knee—"had the Blue Room," she added with a toss of her head as the light faded.

Out in the King's Ride the pheasants were being driven across the noses of the guns. Up they spurted from the underwood like heavy rockets, reddish purple rockets, and as they rose the guns cracked in order, eagerly, sharply, as if a line of dogs had suddenly barked. Tufts of white smoke held together for a moment; then gently solved themselves, faded, and dispersed.

In the deep cut road beneath the hanger, a cart stood, laid already with soft warm bodies, with limp claws, and still lustrous eyes. The birds seemed alive still, but swooning under their rich damp feathers. They looked relaxed and comfortable, stirring slightly, as if they slept upon a warm bank of soft feathers on the floor of the cart.

Then the Squire, with the hang-dog stained face, in the shabby gaiters, cursed and raised his gun.

Miss Antonia stitched on. Now and then a tongue of flame reached round the grey log that stretched from one bar to another across the grate, ate it greedily, then died out, leaving a white bracelet where the bark had been eaten off. Miss Antonia looked up for a moment, stared wide eyed, instinctively, as a dog stares at a flame. Then the flame sank and she stitched again.

Then, silently, the enormously high door opened. Two lean men came in, and drew a table over the hole in the carpet. They went out; they came in. They laid a cloth upon the table. They went out; they came in. They brought a green baize basket of knives and forks; and glasses; and sugar casters; and salt cellars; and bread; and a silver vase with three chrysanthemums in it. And the table was laid. Miss Antonia stitched on.

Again the door opened, pushed feebly this time. A little dog trotted in, a spaniel, nosing nimbly; it paused. The door stood open. And then, leaning on her stick, heavily, old Miss Rashleigh entered. A white shawl, diamond fastened, clouded her baldness. She hobbled; crossed the room; hunched herself in the high-backed chair by the fireside. Miss Antonia went on stitching.

“Shooting,” she said at last.

Old Miss Rashleigh nodded. She gripped her stick. They sat waiting.

The shooters had moved now from the King’s Ride to the Home Woods. They stood in the purple ploughed field outside. Now and then a twig snapped; leaves came whirling. But above the mist and the smoke was an island of blue—faint blue, pure blue—alone in the sky. And in the innocent air, as if straying alone like a cherub, a bell from a far hidden steeple frolicked, gambolled, then faded. Then again up shot the rockets, the reddish purple pheasants. Up and up they went. Again the guns barked; the smoke balls formed; loosened, dispersed. And the busy little dogs ran nosing nimbly over the fields; and the warm damp bodies, still languid and soft, as if in a swoon, were bunched together by the men in gaiters and flung into the cart.

“There!” grunted Milly Masters, the house-keeper, throwing down her glasses. She was stitching, too, in the small dark room that overlooked the stable yard. The jersey, the rough woollen jersey, for her son, the boy who cleaned the Church, was finished. “The end ’o that!” she muttered. Then she heard the cart. Wheels ground on the cobbles. Up she got. With her hands to her hair, her chestnut coloured hair, she stood in the yard, in the wind.

“Coming!” she laughed, and the scar on her cheek lengthened. She unbolted the door of the game room as Wing, the keeper, drove the cart over the cobbles. The birds were dead now, their claws gripped tight, though they gripped nothing. The leathery eyelids were creased greyly over their eyes. Mrs. Masters the housekeeper, Wing the gamekeeper, took bunches of dead birds by the neck and flung them down on the slate floor of the game larder. The slate floor became smeared and spotted with blood. The pheasants looked smaller now, as if their bodies had shrunk together. Then Wing lifted the tail of the cart and drove in the pins which secured it. The sides of the cart were stuck about with little grey-blue feathers, and the floor was smeared and stained with blood. But it was empty.

“The last of the lot!” Milly Masters grinned as the cart drove off.

“Luncheon is served, ma’am,” said the butler. He pointed at the table; he directed the footman. The dish with the silver cover was placed precisely there where he pointed. They waited, the butler and the footman.

Miss Antonia laid her white film upon the basket; put away her silk; her thimble; stuck her needle through a piece of flannel; and hung her glasses on a hook upon her breast. Then she rose.

“Luncheon!” she barked in old Miss Rashleigh’s ear. One second later old Miss Rashleigh stretched her leg out; gripped her stick; and rose too. Both old women advanced slowly to the table; and were tucked in by the butler and the footman, one at this end, one at that. Off came the silver cover. And there was the pheasant, featherless, gleaming; the thighs tightly pressed to its side; and little mounds of breadcrumbs were heaped at either end.

Miss Antonia drew the carving knife across the pheasant’s breast firmly. She cut two slices and laid them on a plate. Deftly the footman whipped it from her, and old Miss Rashleigh raised her knife. Shots rang out in the wood under the window.

“Coming?” said old Miss Rashleigh, suspending her fork.

The branches flung and flaunted on the trees in the Park.

She took a mouthful of pheasant. Falling leaves flicked the window pane; one or two stuck to the glass.

“The Home Woods, now,” said Miss Antonia. “Hugh’s lost that.” “Shooting.” She drew her knife down the other side of the breast. She added potatoes and gravy, brussel sprouts and bread sauce methodically in a circle round the slices on her plate. The butler and the footman stood watching, like servers at a feast. The old ladies ate quietly; silently; nor did they hurry themselves; methodically they cleaned the bird. Bones only were left on their plates. Then the butler drew the decanter towards Miss Antonia, and paused for a moment with his head bent.

“Give it here, Griffiths,” said Miss Antonia, and took the carcass in her fingers and tossed it to the spaniel beneath the table. The butler and the footman bowed and went out.

“Coming closer,” said Miss Rashleigh, listening. The wind was rising. A brown shudder shook the air; leaves flew too fast to stick. The glass rattled in the windows.

“Birds wild,” Miss Antonia nodded, watching the helter-skelter.

Old Miss Rashleigh filled her glass. As they sipped their eyes became lustrous like half precious stones held to the light. Slate blue were Miss Rashleigh’s; Miss Antonia’s red, like port. And their laces and their flounces seemed to quiver, as if their bodies were warm and languid underneath their feathers as they drank.

“It was a day like this, d’you remember?” said old Miss Rashleigh, fingering her glass. “They brought him home—a bullet through his heart. A bramble, so they said. Tripped. Caught his foot. . . .” She chuckled as she sipped her wine.

“And John . . .” said Miss Antonia. “The mare, they said, put her foot in a hole. Died in the field. The hunt rode over him. He came home, too, on a shutter. . . .” They sipped again.

“Remember Lily?” said old Miss Rashleigh. “A bad ’un.” She shook her head. “Riding with a scarlet tassel on her cane. . . .”

“Rotten at the heart!” cried Miss Antonia.

“Remember the Colonel’s letter? Your son rode as if he had twenty devils in him—charged at the head of his men. Then one white devil—ah hah!” She sipped again.

“The men of our house,” began Miss Rashleigh. She raised her glass. She held it high, as if she toasted the mermaid carved in plaster on the fireplace. She paused. The guns were barking. Something cracked in the woodwork. Or was it a rat running behind the plaster?

“Always women . . .” Miss Antonia nodded. “The men of our house. Pink and white Lucy at the Mill—d’you remember?”

“Ellen’s daughter at the Goat and Sickle,” Miss Rashleigh added.

“And the girl at the tailor’s,” Miss Antonia murmured, “where Hugh bought his riding breeches, the little dark shop on the right . . .”

“. . . that used to be flooded every winter. It’s *his* boy,” Miss Antonia chuckled, leaning towards her sister, “that cleans the Church.”

There was a crash. A slate had fallen down the chimney. The great log had snapped in two. Flakes of plaster fell from the shield above the fireplace.

“Falling,” old Miss Rashleigh chuckled. “Falling.”

“And who,” said Miss Antonia, looking at the flakes on the carpet, “who’s to pay?”

Crowing like old babies, indifferent, reckless, they laughed; crossed to the fireplace, and sipped the sherry by the wood ashes and the plaster, until each glass held only one drop of wine, reddish purple, at the bottom. And this the old women did not wish to part with, so it seemed; for they fingered their glasses, as they sat side by side by the ashes; but they never raised them to their lips.

“Milly Masters in the still room,” began old Miss Rashleigh. “She’s our brother’s . . .”

A shot barked beneath the window. It cut the string that held the rain. Down it poured, down, down, down, in straight rods whipping the windows. Light faded from the carpet. Light faded in their eyes, too, as they sat by the white ashes listening. Their eyes became like pebbles, taken from water; grey stones dulled and dried. And their hands gripped their hands like the claws of dead birds gripping nothing. And they shrivelled as if the bodies inside the clothes had shrunk.

Then Miss Antonia raised her glass to the mermaid. It was the last drop; she drank it off. “Coming!” she croaked, and slapped the glass down. A door banged below. Then another. Then another. Feet could be heard trampling, yet shuffling, along the corridor towards the gallery.

“Closer! Closer!” grinned Miss Rashleigh, baring her three yellow teeth.

The immensely high door burst open. In rushed three great hounds and stood panting. Then there entered, slouching, the Squire himself in shabby gaiters. The dogs pressed round him, tossing their heads, snuffing at his pockets. Then they bounded forward. They smelt the meat. The floor of the gallery waved like a wind-lashed forest with the tails and backs of the great questing hounds. They snuffed the table. They pawed the cloth. Then, with a wild neighing whimper, they flung themselves upon the little yellow spaniel who was gnawing the carcass under the table.

“Curse you, curse you!” howled the Squire. But his voice was weak, as if he shouted against a wind. “Curse you, curse you!” he shouted, now cursing his sisters.

Miss Antonia and Miss Rashleigh rose to their feet. The great dogs had seized the spaniel. They worried him, they mauled him with their great yellow teeth. The Squire swung a leather knotted tawse this way and that way, cursing the dogs, cursing his sisters, in the voice that sounded so loud yet so weak. With one lash he curled to the ground the vase of chrysanthemums. Another caught old Miss Rashleigh on the cheek. The old woman staggered backwards. She fell against the mantelpiece. Her stick, striking wildly, struck the shield above the fireplace. She fell with a thud upon the ashes. The shield of the Rashleighs crashed from the wall. Under the mermaid, under the spears, she lay buried.

The wind lashed the panes of glass; shots volleyed in the Park and a tree fell. And then King Edward, in the silver frame, slid, toppled, and fell too.

The grey mist had thickened in the carriage. It hung down like a veil; it seemed to put the four travellers in the corners at

a great distance from each other, though in fact they were as close as a third class railway carriage could bring them. The effect was strange. The handsome, if elderly, the well dressed, if rather shabby woman, who had got into the train at some station in the midlands, seemed to have lost her shape. Her body had become all mist. Only her eyes gleamed, changed, lived all by themselves, it seemed; eyes without a body; eyes seeing something invisible. In the misty air they shone out, they moved, so that in the sepulchral atmosphere—the windows were blurred, the lamps haloed with fog—they were like lights dancing, will o' the wisps that move, people say, over the graves of unquiet sleepers in churchyards. An absurd idea? Mere fancy! Yet after all, since there is nothing that does not leave some residue, and memory is a light that dances in the mind when the reality is buried, why should not the eyes there, gleaming, moving, be the ghost of a family, of an age, of a civilization dancing over the grave?

The train slowed down. Lamps stood up. They were felled. Up they stood again as the train slid into the station. The lights blazed. And the eyes in the corner? They were shut. Perhaps the light was too strong. And of course in the full blaze of the station lamps it was plain—she was quite an ordinary, rather elderly, woman, travelling to London on some ordinary piece of business—something connected with a cat, or a horse, or a dog. She reached for her suit case, rose, and took the pheasants from the rack. But did she, all the same, as she opened the carriage door and stepped out, murmur “Chk., Chk.” as she passed?



Transcriber's Notes

This text has been preserved as in the original, including archaic and inconsistent spelling, punctuation and grammar, except that obvious printer's errors have been silently corrected.

[The end of *The Shooting Party* by Virginia Woolf]