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The Second Woman

Written by Kenneth Cameron

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THE SECOND WOMAN

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CHAPTER ONE

'What a dreadful breakfast – simply appalling! Nothing but cold porridge and toast without butter. Might be the worst breakfast I've ever had, and I've been to some disgusting places.'

'An hour ago there were eggs, gammon, that fish stuff—'

'There was kedgeree? I love kedgeree!'

'You should have got up earlier. What kept you in bed, some duchess?'

'Duchess, indeed! I went to bed at ten with a red dispatch box, and I was up with it again at six!'

'Funny tastes you've got, Hector.'

The two men were walking down a muddy lane between dense hedges, the morning air chilly and damp, with frost on the yellow grass like grey velvet. Behind and ahead of them, other men were moving, some with guns broken at the breech, their breath faint smoke.

The man named Hector – moustached, well-bellied, straight-backed – frowned at those ahead, then at those behind. 'All of them had a proper breakfast, I'm sure. So much for the rewards of virtue. I suppose the kedgeree wasn't very good, in fact. Fenniman is famous for his bad food.' Fenniman was their host. 'Has a very rum cook, said not to pay enough. But luncheon will be spectacular, I promise you – has it catered in London and brought out by rail, everything down to the extra servants and the tables and chairs. Marquee in case it rains. Likes to make a show for the

higher echelon of guests.' He snorted, became sorrowful. 'I shall be starved by luncheon.'

'Good for you.' The other man tapped his friend's waistcoat. 'Well-filled starvation.' He was tall and lean and had an American accent. He had a huge nose, as well, and a greying moustache that hung down each side of his mouth, his face rather weary and battered-looking, as if he had been walking against the wind for too long.

'Don't poke me like that!' Sir Hector Hench-Rose sucked his belly in and put a hand where the American had been tapping. 'It's undignified.' Amused as suddenly as he had been irritated, he said, 'I am a baronet, after all. We're very dignified creatures – unlike you, Denton. Authors have no more dignity than – than artists. Big hats and earrings and Spanish capes and – when are you going to change your clothes, by the way? You're the only one of us in mufti.'

'Change into what?'

'Your shooting clothes.'

'These are my shooting clothes.' He was wearing a rather old lounge suit, green-brown tweed, and a soft hat that had been through a good deal of rain.

'You're joking.'

'You said to wear shooting clothes. These are clothes I can shoot in.'

'I said "shooting suit"!'

'This is a suit.'

'But it's not a *shooting* suit! Look at me. *I* am wearing a shooting suit. Doesn't your man know better than to let you come on a shooting weekend without a shooting suit?'

Denton stopped and looked his friend up and down. 'You're wearing knickers.' Too late, he remembered that 'knickers' meant something different in England.

'They're breeks, and they're part of a shooting suit! Everybody's wearing them – look around you!'

Denton looked at the other men, some of whom were squeezing against the hedges to go around. All of them were wearing tweed

breeches and Norfolk jackets, stiff collars and neckties. 'The lot of you look like a cycling club,' he said.

'We look nothing of the kind! Cyclists wear funny little hats.' Hench-Rose was in fact wearing a tweed hat that might have been considered funny, but it was different from the caps that cyclists wore with *their* breeches and Norfolk jackets. 'Denton, what *were* you thinking of?'

'You said we'd be tramping over wet moors behind dogs.'

'Um, well – not that it makes any difference to the clothes question, but we're not going to be shooting over dogs.' Hench-Rose cleared his throat, stretched his neck from his collar, put his hand again on his waistcoated belly. 'Butts, in fact.'

'What're butts?'

'Place you stand for driven birds. Now, before you go off half-cocked, listen to me! The plans changed; our host suddenly had the chance to entertain several very important persons who are also first-rate shots, and so he – between you and me and the gatepost, he's rather a collector of personages, our Fenniman, the very reason he wanted you, in fact a bit of a bum-sucker – so he waved his magic wand and transformed a rough shoot into driven birds. It's a far more elegant sport, Denton! His Majesty does it!'

'His Majesty does all sorts of things.'

'He makes huge bags.'

'At some of his other pastimes, too, I hear.'

'Now, now, this is too bad of you – I shan't let you impugn my sovereign, much less—' He clutched Denton's arm as another man passed them, murmuring a hello as he stepped around. Beautifully turned out in the required shooting suit, he was carrying an open shotgun in the crook of his right arm. As he went ahead of them and out of earshot, Denton murmured, 'Handsome gun.'

'Do you know who that is? Held, the financier – one of Fenniman's catches. He's a Jew, of course, but the right kind.'

'What's that supposed to mean – the rich kind?'

'You know what I mean – one of *us*. Cultured. Not – you know – Jewy.'

'You certainly wouldn't want a Jew to be Jewy.'

'You know what I mean. Don't be flippant, Denton. Held is a millionaire. At least. Quite welcome in the very best houses.'

'I wish I could say as much for myself. You were telling me about butts.'

Hector frowned and then gave a quick sketch of shooting driven birds from prepared positions while as many as a hundred beaters drove everything that could fly or run towards them. 'Mostly Chinese pheasant now, but there'll be some partridge from last year, plus the odd rabbit or hare. Wonderful bags are made, Denton – Prince Nordeep Singh regularly shoots in the middle hundreds. I have on occasion bagged three hundred myself. No telling how it will go here, of course: Fenniman had stocked for rough shoots, but when he snared Held and a couple of others, he slung in thousands of pheasant from a breeding place, so the count will be well up.'

'I think I'm more the rough-shoot type, Hector.'

'You *look* more like one of the beaters, but in for a penny, in for a pound. I would remind you that I suggested you to Fenniman, and in a sense I'm responsible for you. You *have* to shoot driven birds today, Denton.' His voice had taken on a hint of appeal. Like a parent with a fractious child, he said, 'Perhaps I can get you a rough shoot tomorrow.'

'If I'm a good boy. Hmp.' Denton patted his friend on the shoulder. 'I'll behave, Mother.'

Denton found that he had been placed near the right-hand end of the line of butts, not quite at the end (it was explained to him that a proven good shot would be there to pick up birds he or others missed) and nowhere near the middle, where the personages would shoot and where, it was hoped, the birds would come the thickest.

'First shoot, sir?' a bearded man in a wine-red velvet jacket said to Denton. The man was holding two shotguns, one in each hand. 'I'm Feather, sir, under-keeper. Be loading for you today.' He was eyeing Denton's clothes. 'Used a shotgun before, have you?'

Denton had in fact used a shotgun – to kill four men, but that had been thirty years before, and he wasn't about to talk about it

now. He passed over years of hunting everything from buffalo to prairie hens in the American West, and a year with Cody's Wild West as a 'crack pistolero', said only, 'I know which end the shot comes out of.'

The under-keeper grunted. He insisted on demonstrating the safety device on each gun, the method of raising the gun, of sighting. He explained what it meant to lead the bird. 'These are ejector guns, sir. Open them after shooting, the spent cartridges fly out. Don't you do that, sir. I'll do that. You pass the gun to me after *one or both* barrels are fired – the gun has two barrels, remember – and I'll hand you the newly loaded gun and then crack the first gun and eject, and by the time you've fired number two, I'll have number one loaded and we'll make the exchange again. Now let's practise, please, sir.'

'Shoot, you mean?'

'No, sir, the exchange. The goal is to keep shooting, bang-bang-bang-bang. The birds come very fast and often. Exchange has to be fast and smooth.'

Denton saw that the under-keeper despised him. In his eyes, Denton was an interloper, an American and an ignorant one, at that, who knew nothing about shooting driven birds and would be useless when the shooting started. Now, Feather said, 'Don't mind if you miss, sir. Everybody does, at first.'

'Where do I pee?'

The under-keeper blinked, frowned. He didn't like having the shooting taken less than seriously. Still, he bobbed his chin towards a stand of trees behind them. 'Couple of privies beyond it if the call is serious. Less important thing, do it in that wood. Another for ladies over the cart-track there. We'll rehearse the exchange now, if you please, sir.'

'After I pee.'

Denton strolled up to the little wood, hardly deep enough to give cover to a standing man, but he knew that this class of British were quite offhand about it: so long as his back was turned or one sapling stood between him and onlookers, propriety was satisfied. Discharging the breakfast tea in a cloud of steam, he

heard somebody else come up next to him, glanced over to see the millionaire, Held – the unJewy Jew – unbuttoning his flies.

'Not shooting today?' Held said.

'I am, apparently.'

'I suspect you're rather good at it. You're Denton, aren't you? I'm Henry Held.' He smiled. 'You'll forgive me if we don't shake hands.' He gave his penis a shake and chuckled. 'I read your last book – I think it was your last, *The Love Child*? Rather wonderful. I always marvel that such sad things aren't depressing, but that's the art of it, isn't it? You can do in a book what we can't do in life. How I wish I could do it!' He buttoned himself up and turned away. 'Shoot well. I'm sure you will.'

He knows, Denton thought. Many people did.

He strolled back to the butt, which was really only a waist-high mound of earth pushed up by a horse-drawn scraper.

'We must practise the exchange, sir. The beaters are coming.'

'Is that what I hear – that racket?'

'Yes, sir, the beaters hitting the trees with their sticks. The first birds will appear any moment, sir.'

Denton took a shotgun and passed it back and was handed another; they went through it again, Denton desultory, the underkeeper insistent and quick, and then the first shots sounded from well off – one, and then two almost together – and then there was a second of silence and then a fusillade.

'Now, sir!' Feather was cramming cartridges into one of the guns. He thrust it at Denton. 'Remember to lead, sir – shoot what you can hit; leave the high ones and the fast ones for the good shots—'

A bird came sailing high, high above them, going fast at an angle across the butt. Denton raised the shotgun and killed it, then swung and took a bird that was crossing fast and low from left to right.

'Good shot, sir! Oh, good again—!'

Denton broke the gun and the spent cartridges popped out. He put the gun in the crook of his arm and looked up the line of butts, watching birds come sailing over the treetops into the range

of the guns. Little more than dark dots with the flutter of their wings as a kind of halo, they moved into the open space before the butts and then, more often than not, collapsed in the air as if they had been squeezed by a fist. Feathers burst into a tiny puff, and the bird would come pelting down at an angle, cartwheeling, wings useless, abruptly pathetic.

'The gun, sir – give me the gun! Sir! You've broken the gun yourself— Take the gun, sir!'

Denton turned and looked at him. The under-keeper's face was red, perhaps with anger or perhaps simply with excitement. He had a gun held out almost in Denton's face, and he was trying to wrench the empty one out of his arm.

'I'll tell you when I'm ready for the next gun,' Denton said.

'You must shoot, sir!'

Denton turned back towards the wood, picked off a fast bird with one barrel and then went up and back and caught a high flier that was actually behind him. A voice he didn't recognize shouted, 'Oh, well shot,' from his left. A spattering of applause followed; he turned and saw half a dozen women leaning on parasols or sitting on uncomfortable-looking folding stools.

'Gun!' Feather cried. 'Sir, you *must* shoot!'

'Why? I've got four birds; that's enough.'

'You let that one go – and that one – sir – there's another—!'

'They're too easy.'

'*Shoot!*' The keeper's red face was almost touching Denton's. Denton put his hand on the man's chest and pushed him back as he said very low, 'If you tell me to shoot one more time, I'll belt you one.' He took the loaded gun, let five birds go by as too easy, picked off a fast partridge that had just been missed by the clean-up shooter on his right, and then stood with the gun ready, waiting for another sporting shot.

'Shoot, sir – *please*.' Feather's voice all but broke, as if he were near tears.

Denton held the shotgun out. 'You shoot,' he said.

'No, please – you must—'

'Like hell.' Denton broke the gun, ejecting the spent and the

unspent cartridge, and leaned the shotgun against the berm of dirt. 'You want them dead so much, you shoot them. I've had more sporting times throwing black-powder bombs into fishponds.' He turned and started up towards the women, who were staring at him with horror and a kind of sensual fascination.

'You're leaving the butts!' the under-keeper cried.

'So I am.' He strode on. The hostess, Mrs Fenniman, was one of the group that was watching him. He knew he must have done an unforgivable thing; he knew that Hench-Rose would suffer for having brought him there. But enough was enough.

Removing his hat, he said, 'Mrs Fenniman—'

'You have been taken ill, I am sure.' She was the third daughter of somebody in Salisbury's government, one of his titled crew; her tone was arch, hard, withdrawn, as if he were a boy who couldn't possibly have thought up all by himself the atrocious thing he'd just done.

'Only sick of shooting sitting ducks, ma'am. I'm sorry, but this isn't for me.'

'But you shoot so magnificently,' another woman said.

Mrs Fenniman looked severely at the woman, then at Denton. 'You must, of course, please yourself. As you already have.'

'I'm very sorry. I didn't understand—' He never had to explain what he didn't understand, and it was just as well, as he didn't think he could explain to a woman of her sort what disgusted him about killing the helpless; instead, movement from his left distracted him, and he saw a figure running towards him with a yellow something fluttering in one hand. The figure became his soldier-servant, Atkins, ex-British army, and the something became a telegram that read 'COME TO MY HOUSE AT ONCE STOP J'.

'I must return to London,' he said.

'Of course you must,' Mrs Fenniman said in the voice of a woman who has had the self-sent-telegram trick played on her a hundred times. 'Do not linger out of some misplaced idea of courtesy.'

The Fenniman Panhard bounced along the unmetalled road. Wind reddened the passengers' faces. Denton had forgone goggles;

Atkins, beside him, wore them below his bowler hat, with a grin below the goggles.

'Won't this thing go any faster?' Denton shouted at the driver.

'Unlawful to go more than twenty miles per hour, sir. Mr Fenniman quite strict about it.' He avoided a rutted place and pulled back into the centre of the road, his passengers swaying to one side and then the other. With a bang, a rear tyre burst.

'Oh, hell!' Denton shouted.

'Not to worry, sir. Happens all the time.' The chauffeur climbed down and asked that they do the same, then began to unload the tyre-changing tools from the boot.

'Couldn't you have borrowed a motor car that worked?' Denton snarled to Atkins as they huddled beside the road, a light drizzle beginning to fall on their heads.

'Only one on offer. If you'd ordered your own motor car in time, we'd have it now.'

'It's due any day.'

'Lot of good that does us.'

'You look ridiculous in those goggles.'

'One of us has to be able to see where he's going.'

'Her telegram said to come to *her* house. Not my house. Why?'

'Daresay she wants you to come to her house and not your house.' The 'her' was the *J* of the telegram, Janet Striker, with whom he didn't quite live but with whom he had an intense and constant relationship: their houses backed on each other, separated only by back gardens, allowing for a veneer of propriety over an entirely scandalous – and delightful – intimacy.

'You know, Atkins, if Job advertised for a comforter, I'd write you a character.'

'Only trying to calm the frantic employer.'

'I'm not frantic! What the hell, how long does it take to change a tyre?' Denton jumped into the road and shouted, 'Do you need help?'

The chauffeur waved a hand and said he'd be done at any moment, thank you, sir. He had yet to remove the old tyre.

On the road again, Denton glowered into the drizzle and was

silent. At the railway station, he let Atkins lead him inside, then to the platform, then to a bench. Suddenly he said, 'We should have telephoned.' Janet Striker had the telephone now; his own was to be installed in a week or two, despite his misgivings.

'No telephone at Fenniman's, General. Just like the hot water and the central heating – doesn't exist.'

In time, he let Atkins push him into a railway carriage, where they rode side by side, although custom said he should have gone to first class. Denton disliked the marks of privilege; Atkins knew it and indulged it. Encouraged by Denton, he had manufactured a somewhat cheeky persona that mocked the normal master–servant behaviours. Included in this were the military titles that flickered through Atkins's conversation: Denton, who had been only an acting lieutenant at the end of the American Civil War, got called General, Colonel, Major or Captain by the former sergeant. The fact that Denton paid Atkins half again as much as any manservant in London encouraged him to be offhand.

In London at last, Denton paid a cab driver to 'go as fast as you can', meaning he didn't go very fast at all because of the traffic. It was by now the middle of a busy Saturday, horses and motor cars everywhere, pedestrians crossing in packs like herd animals swimming a river. The traffic smell – urine and horse dung, mixed now and then with petrol fumes – was so strong that some women walked with perfumed hankies at their noses, while, behind them, Commissionaires carried their packages and, hankie-less, inhaled the smells as if they were their native air. Here and there some woman of means was followed by her carriage as she shopped, its walking pace a frustration to Denton as his cab got behind it.

'Damn these women!' he growled. He shouted up at the driver, 'Can't you stay off the damned shopping streets?'

'Not if you want t' get where yer going, I can't.' He sniffed and flicked the horse's back. The horse flicked its tail and kept at the same speed. A few streets later, they came on an entire stretch of road that had been torn up, men in shirtsleeves and caps moving through the rubble with shovels and hods of cement. The cab stopped altogether.

'What now?' Denton roared.

'Bloody telly-phone lines. Bloody Post Office can't keep to its proper business but has to use our bloody money to lay down telly-phones!'

At last they got around Russell Square and into Guilford Street, where the horse, without encouragement, picked up speed, actually achieved a slow trot as they passed the end of Lamb's Conduit Street, where Denton was able to look to his right and see, halfway along, his own house. On the front steps was the unmistakable uniform of a London policeman.

'Uh-oh,' Atkins said.

'Judas Priest.'

'That'll be the least of it.'

The driver put the horse into a lope, and they careered into Millman Street, as if speed over the last sixty yards would make up for the delays. Denton jumped down before the cab had stopped at Janet Striker's door, left the vehicle swaying on its springs as he shouted back to Atkins, 'Pay!'

He pulled the bell, pounded on the door and shouted. Then he kicked the door. Even though he could hear quick footsteps, he shouted and pounded again. His foot was back for another kick when the door opened and Janet Striker was standing there, swaying aside as a huge dog rushed out, barking, and made for Atkins. She looked him in the face, looked down at his foot, smiled, then gasped as he put his arms around her and threatened to break her ribs.

'Denton, you idiot—!' She pushed him back. 'People will see.'

'Are you all right?' He held on to her arms as if ready to shake the truth out of her. '*Are you all right?*'

'I was until you grabbed me. Really—'

'Janet, what's happened?'

She looked down her walk at the cab, at Atkins, now boosting down the luggage, then left and right up the street as if for eavesdroppers. And then she said in a perfectly normal voice, 'I'm afraid there's a corpse in your back garden.'