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Richard Jefferies
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CHOOSING A GUN

THE first thought of the amateur sportsman naturally refers to his gun, and the questions arise : What sort of a gun do I want ? Where can I get it ? What price shall I pay ? In appearance there can be no great difficulty in settling these matters, but in practice it is really by no means easy. Some time since, being on a visit to the Metropolis, I was requested by a friend to get him a gun, and accepted the commission, as M. Emile Ollivier went to war, with a light heart, little dreaming of the troubles that would start up in the attempt to conscientiously carry it out. He wanted a good gun, and was not very scrupulous as to maker or price, provided that the latter was not absolutely extravagant. With such *carte blanche* as this it seemed plain-sailing, and, indeed, I never gave a second thought to the business till I opened the door of the first respectable gunmaker's shop I came across, which happened to be no great distance from Pall Mall. A very polite gentleman immediately came forward, rubbing his hands as if he were washing them (which is an odd habit with many), and asked if there was anything he could do for me. Well, yes, I wanted a gun. Just so—they

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had one of the largest stocks in London, and would be most happy to show me specimens of all kinds. But was there any special sort of gun required, as then they could suit me in an instant.

‘Hum! Ah! Well, I—I’—feeling rather vague—‘perhaps you would let me see your catalogue——’

‘Certainly.’ And a handsomely got-up pamphlet, illustrated with woodcuts, was placed in my hands, and I began to study the pages. But this did not suit him; doubtless, with the practice of his profession, he saw at once the uncertain manner of the customer who was feeling his way, and thought to bring it to a point.

‘You want a good, useful gun, sir, I presume?’

‘That is just it’—shutting the catalogue; quite a relief to have the thing put into shape for one!

‘Then you can’t do better than take our new patent double-action so-and-so. Here it is’—handing me a decent-looking weapon in thorough polish, which I begin to weigh in my hands, poise it to ascertain the balance, and to try how it comes to the present, and whether I can catch the rib quick enough, when he goes on: ‘We can let you have that gun, sir, for ten guineas.’

‘Oh, indeed! But that’s very cheap, isn’t it?’ I thoughtlessly observe, putting the gun down.

My friend D. had mentioned a much higher amount as his ultimatum. The next instant I saw in what light my remark would be taken. It would be interpreted in this way: Here we have either a

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rich amateur, who doesn't care what he gives, or else a fool who knows nothing about it.

'Well, sir, of course it's our very plainest gun'—the weapon is tossed carelessly into the background—'in fact, we sometimes call it our gamekeeper gun. Now, here is a really fine thing—neatly finished, engraved plates, first choice stock, the very best walnut, price——' He names a sum very close to D.'s outside.

I handle the weapon in the same manner, and for the life of me cannot meet his eye, for I know that he is reading me, or thinks he is, like a book. With the exception that the gun is a trifle more elaborately got up, I cannot see or feel the slightest difference, and begin secretly to suspect that the price of guns is regulated according to the inexperience of the purchaser—a sort of sliding scale, gauged to ignorance, and rising or falling with its density! He expatiates on the gun and points out all its beauties.

'Shooting carefully registered, sir. Can see it tried, or try it yourself, sir. Our range is barely three-quarters of an hour's ride. If the stock doesn't quite fit your shoulder, you can have another—the same price. You won't find a better gun in all London.'

I can see that it really is a very fair article, but do not detect the extraordinary excellencies so glibly described. I recollect an old proverb about the fool and the money he is said to part with hastily. I resolve to see more variety before making the final

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plunge ; and what the eloquent shopkeeper thinks is my growing admiration for the gun which I continue to handle is really my embarrassment, for as yet I am not hardened, and dislike the idea of leaving the shop without making a purchase after actually touching the goods. But D.'s money—I must lay it out to the best advantage. Desperately I fling the gun into his hands, snatch up the catalogue, mutter incoherently, 'Will look it through—like the look of the thing—call again,' and find myself walking aimlessly along the pavement outside.

An unpleasant sense of having played a rather small part lingered for some time, and ultimately resolved itself into a determination to make up my mind as to exactly what D. wanted, and on entering the next shop, to ask to see that, and that only. So, turning to the address of another gunmaker, I walked towards it slowly, revolving in my mind the sort of shooting D. usually enjoyed. Visions of green fields, woods just beginning to turn colour, puffs of smoke hanging over the ground, rose up, and blotted out the bustling London scene. The shops glittering with their brightest goods placed in front, the throng of vehicles, the crowds of people, faded away, the pace increased and the stride lengthened as if stepping over the elastic turf, and the roar of the traffic sounded low, like a distant waterfall. From this reverie the rude apostrophes of a hansom-cabman awoke me—I had walked right into the stream of the street, and instead of the awning boughs of the wood found a whip upheld,

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threatening chastisement for getting in the way. This brought me up from imagination to logic with a jerk, and I began to check off the uses D. could put his gun to on the fingers. (1) I knew he had a friend in Yorkshire, and shot over his moor every August. His gun, then, must be suited to grouse-shooting, and must be light, because of the heat which often prevails at that time, and renders dragging a heavy gun many miles over the heather—before they pack—a serious drawback to the pleasure of the sport. (2) He had some partridge-shooting of his own, and was peculiarly fond of it. (3) He was always invited to at least two battues. (4) A part of his own shooting was on the hills, where the hares were very wild, where there was no cover, and they had to be knocked over at long distances, and took a hard blow. That would require (*a*) a choke-bore, which was not suitable either, because in covers the pheasants at short ranges would not unlikely get ‘blown,’ which would annoy the host; or (*b*) a heavy, strong gun, which would take a stiff charge without too much recoil. But that, again, clashed with the light gun for shooting in August. (5) He had latterly taken a fancy to wild-fowl shooting by the coast, for which a very hard-hitting, long-range gun was needed. It would never do if D. could not bring down a duck. (6) He was notorious as a dead shot on snipe—this told rather in favour of a light gun, old system of boring; for where would a snipe or a woodcock be if it chanced to get 200 pellets into it at twenty yards? You might find the

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claws and fragments of the bill if you looked with a microscope. (7) No delicate piece of workmanship would do, because he was careless of his gun, knocked it about anyhow, and occasionally dropped it in a brook. And here was the shop-door; imagine the state of confusion my mind was in when I entered!

This was a very 'big' place: the gentleman who approached had a way of waving his hand—very white and jewelled—and a grand, lofty idea of what a gun should cost. 'Twenty, thirty, forty pounds—some of the £30 were second-hand, of course—we have a few, a very few, second-hand guns'—such was the sweeping answer to my first mild inquiry about prices. Then, seeing at once my vacillating manner, he, too, took me in hand, only in a terribly earnest, ponderous way from which there was no escape. 'You wanted a good general gun—yes; a thoroughly good, well-finished, *plain* gun (great emphasis on the 'plain'). Of course, you can't get anything new for *that* money, finished in style. Still, the plain gun will shoot just as well (as if the shooting part was scarcely worth consideration). We make the very best plain-finished article for five-and-twenty guineas in London. By-the-by, where is your shooting, sir?' Thrust home like this, not over-gratified by a manner which seemed to say, 'Listen to an authority,' and desiring to keep an incog., I mutter something about 'abroad.' 'Ah—well, then, this article is precisely the thing, because it will carry ball, an immense advantage in any country where you may come across large game.'

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‘How far will it throw a ball?’ I ask, rather curious on that subject, for I was under the impression that a smooth-bore of the usual build is not much to be relied on in that way—far less, indeed, than the matchlocks made by semi-civilized nations. But it seems I was mistaken.

‘Why—a hundred yards point-blank, and ten times better to shoot with than a rifle.’

‘Indeed!’

‘Of course, I mean in cover, as you’re pretty sure to be. Say a wild boar is suddenly started: well, you pull out your No. 4 shot-cartridge, and push in a ball; you shoot as well again—snap-shooting with a smooth-bore in jungle or bush. There’s not a better gun turned out in town than that. It’s not the slightest use your looking for anything cheaper—rebouncing locks, best stocks, steel damascene barrels; fit for anything from snipe to deer, from dust to buck-shot—’

‘But I think——’ Another torrent overwhelms me.

‘Here’s an order for twenty of these guns for Texas, to shoot from horseback at buffalo—ride in among them, you know.’

I look at my watch, find it’s much later than I imagine, remark that it is really a difficult thing to pick out a gun, and seize the door-handle.

‘When gentlemen don’t exactly know what they’re looking for it *is* a hard job to choose a gun’—he smiles sarcastically, and shuts me out politely.

The observation seems hard, after thinking over guns so intently; yet it must be aggravating to

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attempt to serve a man who does not know what he wants—yet (one's mood changes quickly) it was his own fault for trying to force, to positively force, that twenty-five-guinea thing on me instead of giving me a chance to choose. I had seen rows on rows of guns stacked round the shop, rank upon rank ; in the background a door partly open permitted a glimpse of a second room, also perfectly coated with guns, if such an expression is permissible. Now, I look on ranges of guns like this much the same as on a library. Is there anything so delicious as the first exploration of a great library—alone—unwatched? You shut the heavy door behind you slowly, reverently, lest a noise should jar on the sleepers of the shelves. For as the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus were dead and yet alive, so are the souls of the authors in the care of their ancient leathern binding. You walk gently round the walls, pausing here to read a title, there to draw out a tome and support it for a passing glance—half in your arms, half against the shelf. The passing glance lengthens till the weight becomes too great, and with a sigh you replace it, and move again, peering up at those titles which are foreshortened from the elevation of the shelf, and so roam from folio to octavo, from octavo to quarto, till at last, finding a little work whose value, were it in the mart, would be more than its weight in gold, you bear it to the low leather-covered arm-chair and enjoy it at your ease. But to sip the full pleasure of a library you must be alone, and you must take the books yourself from the shelves. A man to read must read

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alone. He may make extracts, he may *work* at books in company; but to read, to absorb, he must be solitary. Something in the same way—except in the necessity for solitude, which does not exist in this case—I like to go through a battery of guns, picking up this one, or that, glancing up one, trying the locks of another, examining the thickness of the breech. Why did not the fellow say, ‘There are our guns; walk round, take down what you please, do as you like, and don’t hurry. I will go on with some work while you examine them. Call me if you want any explanation. Spend the day there if you like, and come again to-morrow.’ It would have been a hundred chances to one that I had found a gun to suit D., for the shop was a famous one, the guns really good, the workmanship unimpeachable, and the stock to select from immense. But let a thing be never so good, one does not care to have it positively thrust on one.

By this time my temper was up, and I determined to go through with the business, and get the precise article likely to please D., if I went to every maker in the Metropolis. I went to very nearly every prominent man—I spent several days at it. I called at shops whose names are household words wherever an English sportsman can be found. Some of them, though bright to look at from the pavement, within were mean, and even lacked cleanliness. The attendants were often incapable of comprehending that a customer *may* be as good a judge of what he wants as themselves; they have got into a narrow routine

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of offering the same thing to everybody. No two shops were of the same opinion: at one you were told that the choke was the greatest success in the world; at another, that they only shot well for one season, quickly wearing out; at a third, that such and such a 'grip' or breech-action was perfect; at a fourth, that there never was such a mistake; at a fifth, that hammerless guns were the guns of the future, and elsewhere, that people detested hammerless guns because it seemed like learning to shoot over again. Finally, I visited several of the second-hand shops. They had some remarkably good guns—for the leading second-hand shops do not care to buy a gun unless by a crack maker—but the cheapness was a delusion. A new gun might be got for the same money, or very little more. Their system was like this. Suppose they had a really good gun, but, for aught you could tell, twenty or thirty years old (the breech-action might have been altered), for this they would ask, say £25. The original price of the gun may have been £50, and if viewed *only* with regard to the original price, of course that would be a great reduction. But for the £25 a new gun could be got from a maker whose goods, if not so famous, were thoroughly reliable, and who guaranteed the shooting. In the one case you bought a gun about whose previous history you knew absolutely nothing beyond the mere fact of the barrels having come at first-hand from a leading maker. But they may have been battered about—rebores; they may be scored inside by someone loading with flints;