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Opening Extract from...

John Macnab

Written by John Buchan

Introduction by Andrew Greig

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Introduction

'So you reckon I'm a bit like this John Macnab bloke?' Mal Duff mused as our truck bumped across the Tibetan plateau with the still-unclimbed North-East Ridge of Everest diminishing behind us. 'Didn't he shoot a salmon, a stag and a brace of grouse all in the same day?'

I shook my head. 'No, that's a debased form of the original ploy. The original was a challenge that he could *poach* a deer or a salmon from three Highland estates between such and such a date, *after* telling the owners he was going to.'

'Wow, that's brilliant!' Mal had looked exhausted and depressed since he'd torn his diaphragm at 8,000 metres, somehow struggled off the Ridge and shortly thereafter called off our Expedition. Now he was back to his enthused, unstoppable self. 'You can shoot, can't you, Andy?'

I nodded. I'd been brought up in the country, could use a .22, had been in the rifle club at school.

'And I can catch the salmon, no problem. And then we've got the climbing – that'll give us an edge over the ghillies. I've an SAS mate who can get us infra-red gear . . .'

I wasn't sure what he was raving about, but it was good to see my old friend coming alive again.

'Of course, we'd need to up the stakes a bit,' he mused. 'Let the papers know, make it into a bit of a Land Access rights thing . . .' He thumped the ancient dashboard of the Chinese truck and whooped. 'Got it! The third estate has got to be Balmoral! When the Royals are there!'

I looked at him, then at Everest, still massive behind us. I'd thought he'd been joking when he first brought that one up.

'Duff,' I said, 'you're completely crazy. We can't do it.'

'For when we get a bit old for this Himalayan malarkey! If this John Macnab fella could do it, why can't we?'

'In the first place John Macnab wasn't one person, he was three. And secondly, he didn't exist. It was a story by John Buchan.'

'The *Thirty-Nine Steps* fella?' I nodded, he gazed off into the distance, in the direction of home, Scotland. 'So we do it for real.'

As it happens there *was* a real progenitor for John Macnab: Captain James Brander Dunbar, born in 1875, the same year as Buchan. An upper-class, ex-Boer War eccentric, spy, crack shot and terrific fisherman, flouter of convention while being a Tory to the core – his successful wager with Lord Abinger that he could poach a stag from his estate had become legendary.

If Brander sounds like one of Buchan's high-achieving, stirring Tory heroes, there's a reason: Buchan's key characters, however dashing and improbably multi-talented, were always drawn from experience. When Buchan writes of a winter crossing of the Alps, stirring up revolution in the Balkans, using a trick of the wind to mis-direct deer, giving a hustings speech as a nervous Tory candidate (a recurrent scene), the burdens of high office and dyspepsia, crawling through Highland estates with a ghillie and a gun, teasing salmon with a dry-fly, he had either done it himself or knew well people who had.

This gives his writing authority, passion and conviction, however improbable the tale. And though the social and political attitudes of his times have vanished, Buchan's writing still reads well, for his model was Stevenson, not Scott. The prose remains clear, stripped and yet stirring, combining pace, reflection and uncluttered, characterful narration. Though socially ambitious, Buchan's interest in, attention to and respect for ghillies and 'tinklers' and 'other ranks' makes for a wide range of encounters in *John Macnab*, most memorably with 'Fish Benjie' whose name closes the tale. The various Scots of the book – Lallans,

Doric and Highland – are parts of a remarkable linguistic patchwork, happily embracing inter-textuality and much quotation from classics, folk-tale, Scott, the Bible, Bunyan.

John Macnab stands apart fom the Richard Hannay novels. It is an adventure, not a thriller. There is no great Jewish-anarchist-Bolshevik conspiracy, no great cause into which the heroes are reluctantly drawn. The nearest we come to a baddie is Johnson Claybody, the heir of a self-made millionaire, whose crime is his pompous priggishness, self-importance, materialism and an entire absence of humour or romance.

It also has the most interesting female character in Buchan's fiction in Janet Raden, daughter of Lord Raden, an old-aristocracy Highland landowner. Like Buchan's good women, she is essentially a chap, at home on the hill, wearing breeches, adept at fishing and stalking, with 'the eyes of an adorable boy'. (Just as Sandy Arbuthnot, the most romantic of Buchan's heroes, is repeatedly described as having 'the eyes of a girl'.) Not only does Archie Roylance (the Fourth Macnab in the way George Martin was the Fifth Beatle) fall in love with her in an almost Wodehousian tongue-tied way, but she utters the most unexpected and striking and perhaps deeply-felt notions in the book. She argues passionately with Archie that the old aristocracy are dying, are losing their place and possessions, *because they deserve to*. Her phrases jump out, startling Archie and ourselves equally: 'We've long ago lost our justification'; 'Nobody in the world today has a right to anything he can't justify'. When Archie says this sounds like Bolshevik talk, she retorts it probably is.

Though a Tory to the core, Buchan was an odd and peculiarly Scottish one. Here he argues – and no one, least of all Archie, contradicts Janet – a radical meritocracy. The status quo itself is no justification. Buchan and his characters consistently approve the self-creating nature of American and Colonial life, the lack of 'side' and social inhibition.

John Macnab is the sunniest of Buchan's fictions, as *Sick Heart River* is the most dark and deeply felt. Both take Sir Edward Leithen as the central character, the one Buchan wryly

acknowledged as being closest to himself: a dry, if successful, over-worked, assiduous, sober lawyer. Along with his friends Palliser-Yates (something big in the City, the least rendered character) and Lord Lamancha (Cabinet Minister and crack shot) he suffers from 'taedium vitae'. Work and play have lost their savour. 'I daresay it's due somehow to the war' – and the Great War is the key backdrop to this tale, as it was in Buchan's life. They have got too deeply into their comfort zone, and, lacking a war or crisis, their only solution is to generate a challenge and risk failure and ridicule. Turning their backs on analysis and the 'talking cure', they take up the Stalking Cure.

This theme of comfort zone, staleness and cure by self-created adventure (which can include falling in love) is the heart of *John Macnab*, and it remains lasting and universal. We may live in an age of anxiety and insecurity; it is equally true that we suffer at times from staleness, predictability and living too long inside our comfort zone. That was what drew Mal Duff to the book, for climbing arises more from a terror of boredom than any self-destructive tendency.

A comic outlook does not come naturally to the son of a Free Kirk minister. His fictions can be dashing, stirring, dramatic, but they are always high-minded and Presbyterian at heart. But *John Macnab* is a comedy-adventure, full of flicks of wit, mischief, mockery and mickey-taking (his portrait of the newly-arrived Lady Claybody is quite inspired); like all good comedy it ends (without giving too much away) in an engagement, a feast, self-knowledge ('I think we have all made fools of ourselves'), forgiveness and healing.

We never did our John Macnab ploy, of course, though there was a certain amount of, shall I say, reconnaissance and research. Mal kept going on expeditions, I was ill, we both got older, and one day I realised I was better fitted to write it than do it. So I wrote *The Return of John Macnab*, with somewhat less elevated protagonists, very different politics, and a Janet Raden character that ran away with the book, the ploy and

several hearts. It was a very different take on land ownership, hunting, politics, love and sex, reflecting the distance between now and then.

Yet the heart of Macnab remains the same: for those times when our lives lose their savour, we can turn to the self-created adventure, the challenge, the game, whether it be poaching, climbing or falling in love. I sent up Mal Duff something rotten in the Alastair Sutherland character, which he greatly enjoyed. He was still urging we should do Macnab for real the last time we had a drink together, before he set off on another Everest expedition. He died unexpectedly from a heart attack in his tent. I miss him still, as Buchan so patently missed and mourned for his brother and the friends who died in the Great War, those whose absence and whose memory so inform this rather wonderful and oddly touching book, a celebration of adventures, hills and rivers and friendships shared.

Andrew Greig
January 2007

ONE

In which Three Gentlemen Confess their Ennui

The great doctor stood on the hearth-rug looking down at his friend who sprawled before him in an easy-chair. It was a hot day in early July, and the windows were closed and the blinds half-down to keep out the glare and the dust. The standing figure had bent shoulders, a massive clean-shaven face, and a keen interrogatory air, and might have passed his sixtieth birthday. He looked like a distinguished lawyer, who would soon leave his practice for the Bench. But it was the man in the chair who was the lawyer, a man who had left forty behind him, but was still on the pleasant side of fifty.

'I tell you for the tenth time that there's nothing the matter with you.'

'And I tell you for the tenth time that I'm miserably ill.'

The doctor shrugged his shoulders. 'Then it's a mind diseased, to which I don't propose to minister. What do you say is wrong?'

'Simply what my housekeeper calls a ''no-how'' feeling.'

'It's clearly nothing physical. Your heart and lungs are sound. Your digestion's as good as anybody's can be in London in Midsummer. Your nerves – well, I've tried all the stock tests, and they appear to be normal.'

'Oh, my nerves are all right,' said the other wearily.

'Your brain seems good enough, except for this dismal obsession that you are ill. I can find no earthly thing wrong, except that you're stale. I don't say run-down, for that you're not. You're stale in mind. You want a holiday.'

'I don't. I may *need* one, but I don't *want* it. That's precisely the trouble. I used to be a glutton for holidays, and spent my

leisure moments during term planning what I was going to do. Now there seems to be nothing in the world I want to do – neither work nor play.'

'Try fishing. You used to be keen.'

'I've killed all the salmon I mean to kill. I never want to look the ugly brutes in the face again.'

'Shooting?'

'Too easy and too dull.'

'A yacht.'

'Stop it, old fellow. Your catalogue of undesired delights only makes it worse. I tell you that there's nothing at this moment which has the slightest charm for me. I'm bored with my work, and I can't think of anything else of any kind for which I would cross the street. I don't even want to go into the country and sleep. It's been coming on for a long time – I daresay it's due somehow to the war – but when I was in office I did not feel it so badly, for I was in a service and not my own master. Now I've nothing to do except to earn an enormous income, which I haven't any need for. Work comes rolling in – I've got retainers for nearly every solvent concern in this land – and all that happens is that I want to strangle my clerk and a few eminent solicitors. I don't care a tinker's curse for success, and what is worse, I'm just as apathetic about the modest pleasures which used to enliven my life.'

'You may be more tired than you think.'

'I'm not tired at all.' The speaker rose from his chair yawning, and walked to the windows to stare into the airless street. He did not look tired, for his movements were vigorous, and, though his face had the slight pallor of his profession, his eye was clear and steady. He turned round suddenly.

'I tell you what I've got. It's what the Middle Ages suffered from – I read a book about it the other day – and its called *taedium vitae*. It's a special kind of ennui. I can diagnose my ailment well enough, and Shakespeare has the words for it. I've come to a pitch where I find ''nothing left remarkable beneath the visiting moon''.'

'Then why do you come to me, if the trouble is not with your body?'

'Because you're *you*. I should come to you just the same if you were a vet, or a bone-setter, or a Christian Scientist. I want your advice, not as a fashionable consultant, but as an old friend and a wise man. It's a state of affairs that can't go on. What am I to do to get rid of this infernal disillusionment? I can't go through the rest of my life dragging my wing.'

The doctor was smiling.

'If you ask my professional advice,' he said, 'I am bound to tell you that medical science has no suggestion to offer. If you consult me as a friend, I advise you to steal a horse in some part of the world where a horse-thief is usually hanged.'

The other considered. 'Pretty drastic prescription for a man who has been a Law Officer of the Crown.'

'I speak figuratively. You've got to rediscover the comforts of your life by losing them for a little. You have good food and all the rest of it at your command – well, you've got to be in want for a bit to appreciate them. You're secure and respected and rather eminent – well, somehow or other get under the weather. If you could induce the newspapers to accuse you of something shady and have the devil of a job to clear yourself it might do the trick. The fact is, you've grown too competent. You need to be made to struggle for your life again – your life or your reputation. You have to find out the tonic of difficulty, and you can't find it in your profession. Therefore I say, ''Steal a horse.'' '

A faint interest appeared in the other's eyes.

'That sounds to me good sense. But, hang it all, it's utterly unpractical. I can't go looking for scrapes. I should feel like play-acting if in cold blood I got myself into difficulties, and I take it that the essence of your prescription is that I must feel desperately in earnest.'

'I'm not prescribing. Heaven forbid that I should advise a friend to look for trouble. I'm merely stating how in the abstract I regard your case.'

The patient rose to go. 'Miserable comforters are ye all,' he

groaned. 'Well, it appears you can do nothing for me except to suggest the advisability of crime. I suppose it's no good trying to make you take a fee?'

The doctor shook his head. 'I wasn't altogether chaffing. Honestly, you would be the better of dropping for a month or two into another world – a harder one. A hand on a cattleboat, for instance.'

Sir Edward Leithen sighed deeply as he turned from the doorstep down the long hot street. He did not look behind him, or he would have seen another gentleman approach cautiously round the corner of a side-street, and, when the coast was clear, ring the doctor's bell. He was so completely fatigued with life that he neglected to be cautious at crossings, as was his habit, and was all but slain by a motor-omnibus. Everything seemed weary and over-familiar – the summer smell of town, the din of traffic, the panorama of faces, pretty women shopping, the occasional sight of a friend. Long ago, he reflected with disgust, there had been a time when he had enjoyed it all.

He found sanctuary at last in the shade and coolness of his club. He remembered that he was dining out, and bade the porter telephone that he could not come, giving no reason. He remembered, too, that there was a division in the House that night, an important division advertised by a three-line whip. He declined to go near the place. At any rate, he would have the dim consolation of behaving badly. His clerk was probably at the moment hunting feverishly for him, for he had missed a consultation in the great Argentine bank case which was in the paper next morning. That also could slide. He wanted, nay, he was determined, to make a mess of it.

Then he discovered that he was hungry, and that it was nearly the hour when a man may dine. 'I've only one positive feeling left,' he told himself, 'the satisfaction of my brute needs. Nice position for a gentleman and a Christian!'

There was one other man in the dining-room, sitting at the little table in the window. At first sight he had the look of an undergraduate, a Rugby Blue, perhaps, who had just come

down from the University, for he had the broad, slightly stooped shoulders of the football-player. He had a ruddy face, untidy sandy hair, and large reflective grey eyes. It was those eyes which declared his age, for round them were the many fine wrinkles which come only from the passage of time.

'Hullo, John,' said Leithen. 'May I sit at your table?'

The other, whose name was Palliser-Yeates, nodded.

'You may certainly eat in my company, but I've got nothing to say to you, Ned. I'm feeling as dried-up as a dead starfish.'

They ate their meal in silence, and so preoccupied was Sir Edward Leithen with his own affairs that it did not seem to him strange that Mr Palliser-Yeates, who was commonly a person of robust spirits and plentiful conversation, should have the air of a deaf-mute. When they had reached the fish, two other diners took their seats and waved them a greeting. One of them was a youth with lean, high-coloured cheeks, who limped slightly; the other a tallish older man with a long dark face, a small dark moustache, and a neat pointed chin which gave him something of the air of a hidalgo. He looked weary and glum, but his companion seemed to be in the best of tempers, for his laugh rang out in that empty place with a startling boyishness. Mr Palliser-Yeates looked up angrily, with a shiver.

'Noisy brute, Archie Roylance!' he observed. 'I suppose he's above himself since Ascot. His horse won some beastly race, didn't it? It's a good thing to be young and an ass.'

There was that in his tone which roused Leithen from his apathy. He cast a sharp glance at the other's face.

'You're off-colour.'

'No,' said the other brusquely. 'I'm perfectly fit. Only I'm getting old.'

This was food for wonder, inasmuch as Mr Palliser-Yeates had a reputation for a more than youthful energy and, although forty-five years of age, was still accustomed to do startling things on the Chamonix *aiguilles*. He was head of an eminent banking firm and something of an authority on the aberrations of post-war finance.

A gleam of sympathy came into Leithen's eyes.

'How does it take you?' he asked.

'I've lost zest. Everything seems more or less dust and ashes. When you suddenly wake up and find that you've come to regard your respectable colleagues as so many fidgety old women and the job you've given your life to as an infernal squabble about trifles – why, you begin to wonder what's going to happen.'

'I suppose a holiday ought to happen.'

'The last thing I want. That's my complaint. I have no desire to do anything, work or play, and yet I'm not tired – only bored.'

Leithen's sympathy had become interest.

'Have you seen a doctor?'

The other hesitated. 'Yes,' he said at length. 'I saw old Acton Croke this afternoon. He was no earthly use. He advised me to go to Moscow and fix up a trade agreement. He thought that might make me content with my present lot.'

'He told *me* to steal a horse.'

Mr Palliser-Yeates stared in extreme surprise. 'You! Do you feel the same way? Have you been to Croke?'

'Three hours ago. I thought he talked good sense. He said I must get into a rougher life so as to appreciate the blessings of the life that I'm fed up with. Probably he is right, but you can't take that sort of step in cold blood.'

Mr Palliser-Yeates assented. The fact of having found an associate in misfortune seemed to enliven slightly, very slightly, the spirits of both. From the adjoining table came, like an echo from a happier world, the ringing voice and hearty laughter of youth. Leithen jerked his head towards them.

'I would give a good deal for Archie's gusto,' he said. 'My sound right leg, for example. Or, if I couldn't, I'd like Charles Lamancha's insatiable ambition. If you want as much as he wants, you don't suffer from tedium.'

Palliser-Yeates looked at the gentleman in question, the tall dark one of the two diners. 'I'm not so sure. Perhaps he has got too much too easily. He has come on uncommon quick, you

know, and, if you do that, there's apt to arrive a moment when you flag.'

Lord Lamancha – the title had no connection with Don Quixote and Spain, but was the name of a shieling in a Border glen which had been the home six centuries ago of the ancient house of Merkland – was an object of interest to many of his countrymen. The Marquis of Liddesdale, his father, was a hale old man who might reasonably be expected to live for another ten years and so prevent his son's career being compromised by a premature removal to the House of Lords. He had a safe seat for a London division, was a member of the Cabinet, and had a high reputation for the matter-of-fact oratory which has replaced the pre-war grandiloquence. People trusted him, because, in spite of his hidalgo-ish appearance, he was believed to have that combination of candour and intelligence which England desires in her public men. Also he was popular, for his record in the war and the rumour of a youth spent in adventurous travel touched the imagination of the ordinary citizen. At the moment he was being talked of for a great Imperial post which was soon to become vacant, and there was gossip, in the alternative, of a Ministerial readjustment which would make him the pivot of a controversial Government. It was a remarkable position for a man to have won in his early forties, who had entered public life with every disadvantage of birth.

'I suppose he's happy,' said Leithen. 'But I've always held that there was a chance of Charles kicking over the traces. I doubt if his ambition is an organic part of him and not stuck on with pins. There's a fundamental daftness in all Merklands. I remember him at school.'

The two men finished their meal and retired to the smoking-room, where they drank their coffee abstractedly. Each was thinking about the other, and wondering what light the other's case could shed on his own. The speculation gave each a faint glimmer of comfort.

Presently the voice of Sir Archibald Roylance was heard, and that ebullient young man flung himself down on a sofa beside

Leithen, while Lord Lamancha selected a cigar. Sir Archie settled his game leg to his satisfaction, and filled an ancient pipe.

'Heavy weather,' he announced. 'I've been tryin' to cheer up old Charles and it's been like castin' a fly against a thirty-mile gale. I can't make out what's come over him. Here's a deservin' lad like me struggling at the foot of the ladder and not cast down, and there's Charles high up on the top rungs as glum as an owl and declarin' that the whole thing's foolishness. Shockin' spectacle for youth.'

Lamancha, who had found an arm-chair beside Palliser-Yeates, looked at the others and smiled wryly.

'Is that true, Charles?' Leithen asked. 'Are you also feeling hipped? Because John and I have just been confessing to each other that we're more fed up with everything in this gay world than we've ever been before in our useful lives.'

Lamancha nodded. 'I don't know what has come over me. I couldn't face the House to-night, so I telephoned to Archie to come and cheer me. I suppose I'm stale, but it's a new kind of staleness, for I'm perfectly fit in body, and I can't honestly say I feel weary in mind. It's simply that the light has gone out of the landscape. Nothing has any savour.'

The three men had been at school together, they had been contemporaries at the University, and close friends ever since. They had no secrets from each other. Leithen, into whose face and voice had come a remote hint of interest, gave a sketch of his own mood, and the diagnosis of the eminent consultant. Archie Roylance stared blankly from one to the other, as if some new thing had broken in upon his simple philosophy of life.

'You fellows beat me,' he cried. 'Here you are, every one of you a swell of sorts, with everything to make you cheerful, and you're grousin' like a labour battalion! You should be jolly well ashamed of yourselves. It's fairly temptin' Providence. What you want is some hard exercise. Go and sweat ten hours a day on a steep hill, and you'll get rid of these notions.'

'My dear Archie,' said Leithen, 'your prescription is too crude. I used to be fond enough of sport, but I wouldn't stir a foot to

catch a sixty-pound salmon or kill a fourteen pointer. I don't want to. I see no fun in it. I'm *blasé*. It's too easy.'

'Well, I'm dashed! You're the worst spoiled chap I ever heard of, and a nice example to democracy.' Archie spoke as if his gods had been blasphemed.

'Democracy, anyhow, is a good example to us. I know now why workmen strike sometimes and can't give any reason. We're on strike – against our privileges.'

Archie was not listening. 'Too easy, you say?' he repeated. 'I call that pretty fair conceit. I've seen you miss birds often enough, old fellow.'

'Nevertheless, it seems to me too easy. Everything has become too easy, both work and play.'

'You can screw up the difficulty, you know. Try shootin' with a twenty bore, or fishin' for salmon with a nine-foot rod and a dry-fly cast.'

'I don't want to kill anything,' said Palliser-Yeates. 'I don't see the fun of it.'

Archie was truly shocked. Then a light of reminiscence came into his eye. 'You remind me of poor old Jim Tarras,' he said thoughtfully.

There were no inquiries about Jim Tarras, so Archie volunteered further news.

'You remember Jim? He had a little place somewhere in Moray, and spent most of his time shootin' in East Africa. Poor chap, he went back there with Smuts in the war and perished of blackwater. Well, when his father died and he came home to settle down, he found it an uncommon dull job. So, to enliven it, he invented a new kind of sport. He knew all there was to be known about *shikar*, and from trampin' about the Highlands he had a pretty accurate knowledge of the countryside. So he used to write to the owner of a deer forest and present his compliments, and beg to inform him that between certain dates he proposed to kill one of his stags. When he had killed it he undertook to deliver it to the owner, for he wasn't a thief.'

'I call that poaching on the grand scale,' observed Palliser-Yeates.

'Wasn't it? Most of the fellows he wrote to accepted his challenge and told him to come and do his damnedest. Little Avington, I remember, turned on every man and boy about the place for three nights to watch the forest. Jim usually worked at night, you see. One or two curmudgeons talked of the police and prosecutin' him, but public opinion was against them – too dashed unsportin'.'

'Did he always get his stag?' Leithen asked.

'In-var-i-ably, and got it off the ground and delivered it to the owner, for that was the rule of the game. Sometimes he had a precious near squeak, and Avington, who was going off his head at the time, tried to pot him – shot a gillie in the leg too. But Jim always won out. I should think he was the best *shikari* God ever made.'

'Is that true, Archie?' Lamancha's voice had a magisterial tone.

'True – as – true. I know all about it, for Wattie Lithgow, who was Jim's man, is with me now. He and his wife keep house for me at Crask. Jim never took but the one man with him, and that was Wattie, and he made him just about as cunning an old dodger as himself.'

Leithen yawned. 'What sort of a place is Crask?' he inquired.

'Tiny little place. No fishin' except some hill lochs and only rough shootin'. I take it for the birds. Most marvellous nestin' ground in Britain barrin' some of the Outer Islands. I don't know why it should be, but it is. Something to do with the Gulf Stream, maybe. Anyhow, I've got the greenshank breedin' regularly and the red-throated diver, and half a dozen rare duck. It's a marvellous stoppin' place in spring too, for birds goin' north.'

'Are you much there?'

'Generally in April, and always from the middle of August till the middle of October. You see, it's about the only place I know where you can do exactly as you like. The house is stuck away up on a long slope of moor, and you see the road for a mile from the

windows, so you've plently of time to take to the hills if anybody comes to worry you. I roost there with old Sime, my butler, and the two Lithgows, and put up a pal now and then who likes the life. It's the jolliest bit of the year for me.'

'Have you any neighbours?'

'Heaps, but they don't trouble me much. Crask's the earth-enware pot among the brazen vessels – mighty hard to get to and nothing to see when you get there. So the brazen vessels keep to themselves.'

Lamancha went to a shelf of books above a writing-table and returned with an atlas. 'Who are your brazen vessels?' he asked.

'Well, my brassiest is old Claybody at Haripol – that's four miles off across the hill.'

'Bit of a swine, isn't he?' said Leithen.

'Oh, no. He's rather a good old bird himself. Don't care so much for his family. Then there's Glenraden t'other side of the Larrig' – he indicated a point on the map which Lamancha was studying – 'with a real old Highland grandee living in it – Alastair Raden – commanded the Scots Guards, I believe, in the year One. Family as old as the Flood and very poor, but just manage to hang on. He's the last Raden that will live there, but that doesn't matter so much as he has no son – only a brace of daughters. Then, of course, there's the show place, Strathlarrig – horrible great house as large as a factory, but wonderful fine salmon-fishin'. Some Americans have got it this year – Boston or Philadelphia, I don't remember which – very rich and said to be rather high-brow. There's a son, I believe.'

Lamancha closed the atlas.

'Do you know any of these people, Archie?' he asked.

'Only the Claybodys – very slightly. I stayed with them in Suffolk for a covert shoot two years ago. The Radens have been to call on me, but I was out. The Bandicotts – that's the Americans – are new this year.'

'Is the sport good?'

'The very best. Haripol is about the steepest and most sportin' forest in the Highlands, and Glenraden is nearly as good.

There's no forest at Strathlarrig, but, as I've told you, amazin' good salmon fishin'. For a west coast river, I should put the Larrig only second to the Laxford.'

Lamancha consulted the atlas again and appeared to ponder. Then he lifted his head, and his long face, which had a certain heaviness and sullenness in repose, was now lit by a smile which made it handsomer and younger.

'Could you have me at Crask this autumn?' he asked. 'My wife has to go to Aix for a cure and I have no plans after the House rises.'

'I should jolly well think so,' cried Archie. 'There's heaps of room in the old house, and I promise you I'll make you comfortable. Look here, you fellows! Why shouldn't all three of you come? I can get in a couple of extra maids from Inverlarrig.'

'Excellent idea,' said Lamancha. 'But you mustn't bother about the maids. I'll bring my own man, and we'll have a male establishment, except for Mrs Lithgow . . . By the way, I suppose you can count on Mrs Lithgow?'

'How do you mean, "count"?' asked Archie, rather puzzled. Then a difficulty struck him. 'But wouldn't you be bored? I can't show you much in the way of sport, and you're not naturalists like me. It's a quiet life, you know.'

'I shouldn't be bored,' said Lamancha, 'I should take steps to prevent it.'

Leithen and Palliser-Yeates seemed to divine his intention, for they simultaneously exclaimed. – 'It isn't fair to excite Archie, Charles,' the latter said. 'You know that you'll never do it.'

'I intend to have a try. Hang it, John, it's the specific we were talking about – devilish difficult, devilish unpleasant, and calculated to make a man long for a dull life. Of course you two fellows will join me.'

'What on earth are you talkin' about?' said the mystified Archie. 'Join what?'

'We're proposing to quarter ourselves on you, my lad, and take a leaf out of Jim Tarras's book.'

Sir Archie first stared, then he laughed nervously, then he called upon his gods, then he laughed freely and long. 'Do you really mean it? What an almighty rag! . . . But hold on a moment. It will be rather awkward for me to take a hand. You see I've just been adopted as prospective candidate for that part of the country.'

'So much the better. If you're found out – which you won't be – you'll get the poaching vote solid, and a good deal more. Most men at heart are poachers.'

Archie shook a doubting head. 'I don't know about that. They're an awfully respectable lot up there, and all those dashed stalkers and keepers and gillies are a sort of trade-union. The scallywags are a hopeless minority. If I get sent to quod–'

'You won't get sent to quod. At the worst it will be a fine, and you can pay that. What's the extreme penalty for this kind of offence, Ned?'

'I don't know,' Leithen answered. 'I'm not an authority on Scots law. But Archie's perfectly right. We can't go making a public exhibition of ourselves like this. We're too old to be listening to the chimes at midnight.'

'Now, look here.' Lamancha had shaken off his glumness and was as tense and eager as a schoolboy. 'Didn't your doctor advise you to steal a horse? Well, this is a long sight easier than horse-stealing. It's admitted that we three want a tonic. On second thoughts Archie had better stand out – he hasn't our ailment, and a healthy man doesn't need medicine. But we three need it, and this idea is an inspiration. Of course we take risks, but they're sound sporting risks. After all, I've a reputation of a kind, and I put as much into the pool as anyone.'

His hearers regarded him with stony faces, but this in no way checked his ardour.

'It's a perfectly first-class chance. A lonely house where you can see visitors a mile off, and an unsociable dog like Archie for a host. We write the letters and receive the answers at a London address. We arrive at Crask by stealth, and stay there unbeknown to the countryside, for Archie can count on his people

and my man in a sepulchre. Also we've got Lithgow, who played the same game with Jim Tarras. We have a job which will want every bit of our nerve and ingenuity with a reasonable spice of danger – for, of course, if we fail we should cut queer figures. The thing is simply ordained by Heaven for our benefit. Of course you'll come.'

'I'll do nothing of the kind,' said Leithen.

'No more will I,' said Palliser-Yeates.

'Then I'll go alone,' said Lamancha cheerfully. 'I'm out for a cure, if you're not. You've a month to make up your mind, and meanwhile a share in the syndicate remains open to you.'

Sir Archie looked as if he wished he had never mentioned the fatal name of Jim Tarras. 'I say, you know, Charles,' he began hesitatingly, but was cut short.

'Are you going back on your invitation?' asked Lamancha sternly. 'Very well, then, I've accepted it, and what's more I'm going to draft a specimen letter that will go to your Highland grandee, and Claybody and the American.'

He rose with a bound and fetched a pencil and a sheet of notepaper from the nearest writing-table. 'Here goes – *Sir, I have the honour to inform you that I propose to kill a stag* – or a salmon as the case may be – *on your ground between midnight on – and midnight* –. We can leave the dates open for the present. *The animal, of course, remains your property and will be duly delivered to you. It is a condition that it must be removed wholly outside your bounds. In the event of the undersigned failing to achieve his purpose he will pay as forfeit one hundred pounds, and if successful fifty pounds to any charity you may appoint. I have the honour to be, your obedient humble servant.*'

'What do you say to that?' he asked. 'Formal, a little official, but perfectly civil, and the writer proposes to pay his way like a gentleman. Bound to make a good impression.'

'You've forgotten the signature,' Leithen observed dryly.

'It must be signed with a *nom de guerre*.' He thought for a moment. 'I've got it. At once business-like and mysterious.' At the bottom of the draft he scrawled the name 'John Macnab'.