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Opening Extract from...

The Power House

Written by John Buchan

Introduction by Stella Rimington

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Introduction

The Power House is one of the least known of Buchan's mature works, a tale without a plot, and so full of holes that it calls to mind Samuel Johnson's definition of a 'network' – 'anything reticulated and desuccated, at equal distances, with interstices between the intersections'. It is pure essence of Buchan – a demonstration of his magical power to weave a tale out of no materials but the threads and colours of his imagination. It does, however, possess a theme – John Bunyan's idea, in *Pilgrim's Progress*, of men of goodwill and courage struggling with an intelligent, evil power at the root of all the world's troubles and confusions. The same idea inspired the Richard Hannay stories that quickly followed the appearance of *The Power House* in 1913: *The Thirty-nine Steps*, *Greenmantle*, *Mr Standfast* and *The Three Hostages*. However, in none of Buchan's books is there a keener sense of place or a clearer victory of sense over unreason than in *The Power House*.

The novel was written for *Blackwood's Magazine* at a time when Buchan, working with the Scottish publisher Nelson, was bringing out pocket editions of literature. Already a best-selling novelist – *Prester John* was published in 1910 – the back of his mind must have been full of scraps of A.E.W. Mason, W.W. Jacobs, H.G. Wells, Conrad and Hilaire Belloc, all republished at sevenpence, as well as ideas from his long-time favourites, Stevenson, Kipling, Conan Doyle, Rider Hag-

gard and possibly even from Edgar Wallace, whose *Four Just Men* came out in 1906. Strains of all these permeate *The Power House*. It needed only the advent of the Great War, together with a powerful injection of Buchan's own international wartime intelligence experiences and a string of characters drawn from his wide circle of political and military friends, to turn *The Power House* formula into that of the Hannay books.

In his autobiography, published in 1940, Buchan confesses he is 'fascinated by the notion of hurried journeys . . . a theme common to Homer and the penny reciters, [appealing] to a very ancient instinct in human nature . . . Whether failure or success results, life is sharpened, intensified, idealised'. *The Power House* embodies this philosophy, as well as Buchan's conception of the hero as a man of sense, the best of his land and country, a thoroughgoing Eton-educated gentleman. Such a man is intelligent enough not to be 'brainy', and is most fully alive when, abandoning comfort, he confronts the wild – conceived of as a moor or mountain inhabited by hostile foreigners.

The hero of *The Power House* is Leithen (named after a tributary of the River Tweed in Scotland). Like Buchan, he is a barrister, but also a sportsman. Buchan sets his protagonist the task of solving the problems of a lady troubled with a disappearing husband. However, it is a smoking-room desperado who goes to Uzbekistan to do the actual husband-rescuing rough stuff, while Leithen is subjected to the attentions of the Evil One in the streets of London and the leafy byways of Surrey. The storytelling touch, which never fails with Buchan, is to mirror the cheerful and the humdrum with the deeply sinister and the threatening, producing a kind of nightmare which only steadfast courage and good judgement can restore to sanity and sense.

However, Leithen's virtues are hardly the point of interest. What really makes this book hum is the first appearance of the Buchan villain, already fully fledged. In this tale he is called Andrew Lumley, but in later books much the same character appears as Graf von Schwabing, Medina or even Hilda von Einem. Lumley, alias Julius Pavia, is English, but with a touch of the Hapsburg about his jaw. Like von Schwabing in *The Thirty-nine Steps*, Buchan makes him appear first in a library. Medina in *The Three Hostages* also has a library – 'as mysterious as the aisles of a forest', filled with 'books, books, old books full of forgotten knowledge'.

Curiously, all the Buchan villains have sinister eyes, Lumley so much so that he has to wear green spectacles. Von Schwabing can hood his eyes like a hawk and they are, moreover, 'cold, malignant, unearthly and horribly clever'. Medina's are 'not the pale blue . . . [of] our Norse ancestry, but [like] a sapphire, entrancing'. Von Einem's eyes pass the paleness test, but are 'strange, potent . . . the cold eyes of the fanatic'. However, she has compensatory aspects.

Despite their menacing eyes, alien names and jawlines, Buchan's villains, like his heroes, move in the best circles and attend the most distinguished dinners. They play for the highest stakes. But their sophistication is a masquerade – middle-classness lurks not far beneath the surface. Lumley has mercantile connections, a house in Blackheath, and a very un-Jeeves-like ex-trades-unionist butler. Von Schwabing looks like Mr Pickwick, calls himself 'Moxon Ivery', addresses a meeting of the 'New Movement' in Biggleswick and plays tennis under the pseudonym of Percy Appleton. No gentleman would dream of doing any of that. Even Medina, though indubitably a squire, performs evil deeds in Gospel Oak.

Furthermore, they are all spies and impersonators.

Granted, Hannay is not averse to amateur dramatics, but despite passing for a renegade Dutch peasant or a Highland road-mender, he remains ineffably gentlemanly. At no time does Hannay resort to hypnosis to learn the enemy's secrets, as Medina does, or size them up for seduction like von Einem, or seek, like Lumley, to undermine their morale with tall propositions about the twilight of the world.

It is never clear in Buchan's tales what really drives all these villains on. What are they actually after? When Leithen ventures to probe this, Lumley answers, 'How should I be able to tell you? . . . I cannot pry into motives . . . I only know of the existence of vast extra-social intelligences; let us say that they distrust the machine.' According to MacGillivray of Scotland Yard, more clues are available 'in the sonnet of a poet anarchist who shot himself in the slums of Antwerp, and in the extra-ordinary testimony of a Professor M— of Jena who at the age of thirty-seven took his life after writing a strange mystical message to his fellow-citizens.' Tantalising stuff, but we learn no more.

In Buchan, the fate of the villains does not vary – defeated by straight dealing and gentlemanly behaviour, they simply deliquesce. Schwabing does so twice, once during a bombing raid on London and then again when made to fight honestly, at which point he runs and is shot by his own people. Medina, cornered on a crag, unsportingly attempts a murder and falls to his death, but it is left uncertain as to whether this is through suicide or fatigue. Lumley does at least meet the final act like a gentleman. He tries a bargain, recognises defeat, and promptly expires. One thing is clear: vanity and ambition does for all of them. Von Einem is the exception – she fails, of course, because she is a woman. Her sin is pride, not vanity, and she dies like a hero.

Of course, the Buchan villain never operates single-handedly: behind each one can be found armies of underlings. At least three hundred aides, many in disguise, must have been required to track Leithen round London, pushing him into deserted building sites and luring him into taxis. Von Einem seems to command a battalion of German officers, and Schwabing keeps scores of gillies and a monoplane in Galloway on the off-chance that somebody would need to be hunted over the moors. These villains are able to operate as monarchs of crime, seeking to destroy a civilisation that has lost, in Lumley's words, 'its one great power – the terror of God and his Church'. They are a cerebral corporation, 'nameless brains, working silently in the background', occasionally producing 'some cataclysmic revelation' – such as the Great War itself. 'Some day there will come the marriage of knowledge and will, and then the world will march', Lumley says. The dark forces are internationalised, or, as we might say nowadays, globalised. To the fore are international unions of workers and meetings of middle-class intellectuals. Worst of all is their 'half-scientific, half-philosophic jargon . . . dear . . . to the hearts of the half-baked'. Very true, of course, and the thinness of the crust of civilisation, whatever that may nowadays be, is as relevant in our time as it was when Buchan was writing in the early war-torn years of the twentieth century. This book's intoxicating blend of madness with scents of home and countryside must have appealed powerfully to fighting men facing the one and longing for the other. It is easy to see why.

Stella Rimington
April 2007

PREFACE BY THE EDITOR

We were at Glenaicill – six of us – for the duck-shooting, when Leithen told us this story. Since five in the morning we had been out on the skerries, and had been blown home by a wind which threatened to root the house and its wind-blown woods from their precarious lodgment on the hill. A vast nondescript meal, luncheon and dinner in one, had occupied us till the last daylight departed, and we settled ourselves in the smoking-room for a sleepy evening of talk and tobacco.

Conversation, I remember, turned on some of Jim's trophies which grinned at us from the firelit walls, and we began to spin hunting yarns. Then Hoppy Bynge, who was killed next year on the Bramaputra, told us some queer things about his doings in New Guinea, where he tried to climb Carstensz, and lived for six months in mud. Jim said he couldn't abide mud – anything was better than a country where your boots rotted. (He was to get enough of it last winter in the Ypres Salient.) You know how one tale begets another, and soon the whole place hummed with odd recollections, for five of us had been a good deal about the world.

All except Leithen, the man who was afterwards Solicitor-General, and, they say, will get to the Woolsack in time. I don't suppose he had ever been farther from home than Monte Carlo, but he liked hearing about the ends of the earth.

Jim had just finished a fairly steep yarn about his experiences on a Boundary Commission near Lake Chad, and Leithen got up to find a drink.

'Lucky devils,' he said. 'You've had all the fun out of life. I've had my nose to the grindstone ever since I left school.'

I said something about his having all the honour and glory.

'All the same,' he went on, 'I once played the chief part in a rather exciting business without ever once budging from London. And the joke of it was that the man who went out to look for adventure only saw a bit of the game, and I who sat in my chambers saw it all and pulled the strings. ''They also serve who only stand and wait,'' you know.'

Then he told us this story. The version I give is one he afterwards wrote down, when he had looked up his diary for some of the details.

ONE

Beginning of the Wild-Goose Chase

It all started one afternoon early in May when I came out of the House of Commons with Tommy Deloraine. I had got in by an accident at a by-election, when I was supposed to be fighting a forlorn hope, and as I was just beginning to be busy at the Bar I found my hands pretty full. It was before Tommy succeeded, in the days when he sat for the family seat in Yorkshire, and that afternoon he was in a powerful bad temper. Out of doors it was jolly spring weather; there was greenery in Parliament Square and bits of gay colour, and a light wind was blowing up from the river. Inside a dull debate was winding on, and an advertising member had been trying to get up a row with the Speaker. The contrast between the frowsy place and the cheerful world outside would have impressed even the soul of a Government Whip.

Tommy sniffed the spring breeze like a supercilious stag.

'This about finishes me,' he groaned. 'What a juggins I am to be mouldering here! Joggleberry is the celestial limit, what they call in happier lands the pink penultimate. And the frowst on those back benches! Was there ever such a moth-eaten old museum?'

'It is the Mother of Parliaments,' I observed.

'Damned monkey-house,' said Tommy. 'I must get off for a bit or I'll bonnet Joggleberry or get up and propose a national monument to Guy Fawkes or something silly.'

I did not see him for a day or two, and then one morning he rang me up and peremptorily summoned me to dine with him. I went, knowing very well what I should find. Tommy was off next day to shoot lions on the Equator, or something equally unconscientious. He was a bad acquaintance for a placid, sedentary soul like me, for though he could work like a Trojan when the fit took him, he was never at the same job very long. In the same week he would harass an Under-Secretary about horses for the Army, write voluminously to the press about a gun he had invented for potting aeroplanes, give a fancy-dress ball which he forgot to attend, and get into the semi-final of the racquets championship. I waited daily to see him start a new religion.

That night, I recollect, he had an odd assortment of guests. A Cabinet Minister was there, a gentle being for whom Tommy professed public scorn and private affection; a sailor; an Indian cavalry fellow; Chapman, the Labour member, whom Tommy called Chipmunk; myself, and old Milson of the Treasury. Our host was in tremendous form, chaffing everybody, and sending Chipmunk into great rolling gusts of merriment. The two lived adjacent in Yorkshire, and on platforms abused each other like pickpockets.

Tommy enlarged on the misfits of civilised life. He maintained that none of us, except perhaps the sailor and the cavalryman, were at our proper jobs. He would have had Wytham – that was the Minister – a cardinal of the Roman Church, and he said that Milson should have been the Warden of a college full of port and prejudice. Me he was kind enough to allocate to some reconstructed Imperial General Staff, merely because I had a craze for military history. Tommy's perception did not go very deep. He told

Chapman he should have been a lumberman in California. 'You'd have made an uncommon good logger, Chipmunk, and you know you're a dashed bad politician.'

When questioned about himself he became reticent, as the newspapers say. 'I doubt if I'm much good at any job,' he confessed, 'except to ginger up my friends. Anyhow I'm getting out of this hole. Paired for the rest of the session with a chap who has lockjaw. I'm off to stretch my legs and get back my sense of proportion.'

Someone asked him where he was going, and was told 'Venezuela, to buy Government bonds and look for birds' nests.'

Nobody took Tommy seriously, so his guests did not trouble to bid him the kind of farewell a prolonged journey would demand. But when the others had gone, and we were sitting in the little back smoking-room on the first floor, he became solemn. Portentously solemn, for he wrinkled up his brows and dropped his jaw in the way he had when he fancied he was in earnest.

'I've taken on a queer job, Leithen,' he said, 'and I want you to hear about it. None of my family know, and I would like to leave some one behind me who could get on to my tracks if things got troublesome.'

I braced myself for some preposterous confidence, for I was experienced in Tommy's vagaries. But I own to being surprised when he asked me if I remembered Pitt-Heron.

I remembered Pitt-Heron very well. He had been at Oxford with me, but he was no great friend of mine, though for about two years Tommy and he had been inseparable. He had had a prodigious reputation for cleverness with everybody but the college authorities, and used to spend his vacations doing mad things in the Alps and the Balkans,

and writing about them in the halfpenny press. He was enormously rich – cottonmills and Liverpool ground-rents – and being without a father, did pretty much what his fantastic taste dictated. He was rather a hero for a bit after he came down, for he had made some wild journey in the neighbourhood of Afghanistan, and written an exciting book about it.

Then he married a pretty cousin of Tommy's, who happened to be the only person that ever captured my stony heart, and settled down in London. I did not go to their house, and soon I found that very few of his friends saw much of him either. His travels and magazine articles suddenly stopped, and I put it down to the common course of successful domesticity. Apparently I was wrong.

'Charles Pitt-Heron,' said Tommy, 'is blowing up for a most thundering mess.'

I asked what kind of mess, and Tommy said he didn't know. 'That's the mischief of it. You remember the wild beggar he used to be, always off on the spree to the Mountains of the Moon or somewhere. Well, he has been damping down his fires lately, and trying to behave like a respectable citizen, but God knows what he has been thinking! I go a good deal to Portman Square, and all last year he has been getting queerer.'

Questions as to the nature of the queerness only elicited the fact that Pitt-Heron had taken to science with some enthusiasm.

'He has got a laboratory at the back of the house – used to be the billiard-room – where he works away half the night. And Lord! The crew you meet there! Every kind of heathen – Chinese and Turks, and long-haired chaps from Russia, and fat Germans. I've several times blundered into the push. They've all got an odd secretive air about them, and Charlie is

becoming like them. He won't answer a plain question or look you straight in the face. Ethel sees it too, and she has often talked to me about it.'

I said I saw no harm in such a hobby.

'I do,' said Tommy grimly. 'Anyhow, the fellow has bolted.'

'What on earth—' I began, but was cut short.

'Bolted without a word to a mortal soul. He told Ethel he would be home for luncheon yesterday, and never came. His man knew nothing about him, hadn't packed for him or anything; but he found he had stuffed some things into a kit-bag and gone out by the back through the mews. Ethel was in terrible straits and sent for me, and I ranged all yesterday afternoon like a wolf on the scent. I found he had drawn a biggish sum in gold from the bank, but I couldn't find any trace of where he had gone.

'I was just setting out for Scotland Yard this morning when Tomlin, the valet, rang me up and said he had found a card in the waistcoat of the dress clothes that Charles had worn the night before he left. It had a name on it like Konalevsky, and it struck me that they might know something about the business at the Russian Embassy. Well, I went round there, and the long and short of it was that I found there was a fellow of that name among the clerks. I saw him, and he said he had gone to see Mr Pitt-Heron two days before with a letter from some Embassy chap. Unfortunately the man in question had gone off to New York next day, but Konalevsky told me one thing which helped to clear up matters. It seemed that the letter had been one of those passports that Embassies give to their friends – a higher-powered sort than the ordinary make – and Konalevsky gathered from something he had heard that Charles was aiming at Moscow.'

Tommy paused to let his news sink in.

'Well, that was good enough for me. I'm off tomorrow to run him to ground.'

'But why shouldn't a man go to Moscow if he wants?' I said feebly.

'You don't understand,' said the sage Tommy. 'You don't know old Charles as I know him. He's got into a queer set, and there's no knowing what mischief he's up to. He's perfectly capable of starting a revolution in Armenia or somewhere merely to see how it feels like to be a revolutionary. That's the damned thing about the artistic temperament. Anyhow, he's got to chuck it. I won't have Ethel scared to death by his whims. I am going to hale him back from Moscow, even if I have to pretend he's an escaped lunatic. He's probably like enough one by this time if he has taken no clothes.'

I have forgotten what I said, but it was some plea for caution. I could not see the reason for these heroics. Pitt-Heron did not interest me greatly, and the notion of Tommy as a defender of the hearth amused me. I thought that he was working on very slight evidence, and would probably make a fool of himself.

'It's only another of the man's fads,' I said. 'He never could do things like an ordinary mortal. What possible trouble could there be? Money?'

'Rich as Croesus,' said Tommy.

'A woman?'

'Blind as a bat to female beauty.'

'The wrong side of the law?'

'Don't think so. He could settle any ordinary scrape with a cheque.'

'Then I give it up. Whatever it is, it looks as if Pitt-Heron would have a companion in misfortune before you are done

with the business. I'm all for you taking a holiday, for at present you are a nuisance to your friends and a disgrace to your country's legislature. But for goodness' sake curb your passion for romance. They don't like it in Russia.'

Next morning Tommy turned up to see me in Chambers. The prospect of travel always went to his head like wine. He was in wild spirits, and had forgotten his anger at the defaulting Pitt-Heron in gratitude for his provision of an occupation. He talked of carrying him off to the Caucasus when he had found him, to investigate the habits of the Caucasian stag.

I remember the scene as if it were yesterday. It was a hot May morning, and the sun which came through the dirty window in Fountain Court lit up the dust and squalor of my working chambers. I was pretty busy at the time, and my table was well nourished with briefs. Tommy picked up one and began to read it. It was about a new drainage scheme in West Ham. He tossed it down and looked at me pityingly.

'Poor old beggar!' he said. 'To spend your days on such work when the world is chock-full of amusing things. Life goes roaring by and you only hear the echo in your stuffy rooms. You can hardly see the sun for the cobwebs on these windows of yours. Charles is a fool, but I'm blessed if he isn't wiser than you. Don't you wish you were coming with me?'

The queer thing was that I did. I remember the occasion, as I have said, for it was one of the few on which I have had a pang of dissatisfaction with the calling I had chosen. As Tommy's footsteps grew faint on the stairs I suddenly felt as if I were missing something, as if somehow I were out of it. It is an unpleasant feeling even when you know that the thing you are out of is foolishness.

Tommy went off at eleven from Victoria, and my work was

pretty well ruined for the day. I felt oddly restless, and the cause was not merely Tommy's departure. My thoughts kept turning to the Pitt-Herons – chiefly to Ethel, that adorable child unequally yoked to a perverse egoist, but a good deal to the egoist himself. I have never suffered much from whimsies, but I suddenly began to feel a curious interest in the business – an unwilling interest, for I found it in my heart to regret my robust scepticism of the night before. And it was more than interest. I had a sort of presentiment that I was going to be mixed up in the affair more than I wanted. I told myself angrily that the life of an industrious common-law barrister could have little to do with the wanderings of two maniacs in Muscovy. But, try as I might, I could not get rid of the obsession. That night it followed me into my dreams, and I saw myself with a knout coercing Tommy and Pitt-Heron in a Russian fortress which faded away into the Carlton Hotel.

Next afternoon I found my steps wending in the direction of Portman Square. I lived at the time in Down Street, and I told myself I would be none the worse of a walk in the Park before dinner. I had a fancy to see Mrs Pitt-Heron, for, though I had only met her twice since her marriage, there had been a day when we were the closest of friends.

I found her alone, a perplexed and saddened lady with imploring eyes. Those eyes questioned me as to how much I knew. I told her presently that I had seen Tommy and was aware of his errand. I was moved to add that she might count on me if there were anything she wished done on this side of the Channel.

She was very little changed. There was still the old exquisite slimness, the old shy courtesy. But she told me nothing. Charles was full of business and becoming very forgetful. She was sure the Russian journey was all a stupid

mistake. He probably thought he had told her of his departure. He would write; she expected a letter by every post.

But her haggard eyes belied her optimism. I could see that there had been odd happenings of late in the Pitt-Heron household. She either knew or feared something – the latter, I thought, for her air was more of apprehension than of painful enlightenment.

I did not stay long, and, as I walked home, I had an awkward feeling that I had intruded. Also I was increasingly certain that there was trouble brewing, and that Tommy had more warrant for his journey than I had given him credit for. I cast my mind back to gather recollections of Pitt-Heron, but all I could find was an impression of a brilliant, uncomfortable being, who had been too fond of the byways of life for my sober tastes. There was nothing crooked in him in the wrong sense, but there might be a good deal that was perverse. I remember consoling myself with the thought that, though he might shatter his wife's nerves by his vagaries, he would scarcely break her heart.

To be watchful, I decided, was my business. And I could not get rid of the feeling that I might soon have cause for all my vigilance.