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Opening Extract from...

The Dancing Floor

Written by John Buchan

Introduction by Robin Hardy

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Introduction

A new novel by John Buchan was a virtually annual treat for readers of English in the 1920s and 1930s; a given was high suspense which might transport the reader to the souks of north Africa, the opium dens of south-east Asia or even the hurly-burly of the House of Commons bar in London after a cliff-hanging vote. Yet, as this new edition of *The Dancing Floor* reminds us, here is a tale where Buchan surprised his readers. His characters, so often concerned with the intrigues of mutually hostile and competing nations, find themselves part of a story about competing religious beliefs. A people who believe their faith in Christianity has betrayed them return to the pagan verities of their remote ancestors. Buchan, the student of classics at school and university, is an expert guide to the path that takes us back to a religion where the gods have to be propitiated if the people are to be saved from what appears to be a curse. While this theme is unusual in a Buchan novel, he nevertheless furnishes the story with some familiar characters from his other books and guides us, unwarily, into total nightmare and, breathless with relief, out the other side.

When the First World War was over, Great Britain seems, in retrospect, to have been a nation in transition. Nowhere was this mood more evident than in the thrillers written in the two post-war decades. The great continental European empires of Germany, Russia and Austria-Hungary had gone. The British Empire remained but it was already clear that it faced a hostile future. The new political religions of fascism and communism tempted some Englishmen, but the real heroes of contemporary fiction knew they might have to fight them. In a genre

pioneered by H. Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines*, at the end of the nineteenth century, superbly followed by Erskine Childers' *The Riddle of the Sands,* it took John Buchan, a son of the Scottish manse, honed in military intelligence (like his successor, Ian Fleming), to create quintessential British heroes for these uncertain times. A world away from the somewhat caddish and brutal James Bond and the long list of product placements he seems to enjoy, Richard Hannay in *The Thirty-Nine Steps* simply stands unashamedly for king and country and the need always to do the right, the decent, the unselfish and, if necessary, the heroic thing. In *The Dancing Floor* and nearly all of the huge body of fiction Buchan wrote, the difference between men who are good or evil is nearly always crystal clear from the moment they appear on the page. With his women, while they are well described, what they will be capable of we are less certain. In *The Dancing Floor* he writes of Kore Arabin's generation: 'The modern girl, with all her harshness, had the gallantry of a free woman. She was a crude Artemis, but her feet were on the hills. Was the blushing, sheltered maid of our grandmother's day no more than an untempted Aphrodite?'

His heroes were Scottish and English gentlemen. No apologies for believing that the precious few who had survived the decimations of the First World War were to be defined as a race apart. Private Tommy Atkins was a fine fellow and there is many a plucky, demobilised Tommy in this author's stories, admirable but often unconsciously funny. The parfait gentle knights, the *pukka sahibs*, the clean-limbed products of schools where brilliant classicists and superb athletes went on to win the glittering prizes a great empire still had to offer were invariably gentlemen born not made. *The Dancing Floor* has two memorable examples: Edward Leithen (many think him Buchan's alter ego) and the much younger Vernon Milburne are men of extraordinary quality, they share a gift for friendship and loyalty, they value each other's intellectual prowess, they both aspire to be physically fit – and yet they are not unflawed, not without illusions, capable of dangerous hesitations. It is part of Buchan's

art that he can create characters in whom all these qualities can credibly co-exist. It is part of his mastery of suspense that although we feel we know his heroes well there always remains room for a scintilla of uncertainty.

It is important, when reading Buchan, to accept his viewpoints in the context of his era. It is all too easy to apply the politically correct perspectives of the twenty-first century to his attitudes and opinions because of the language he sometimes uses. He tells us that Leithen sees a beautiful girl dancing with a Jew to the music of a nigger band. This simply describes her as seeming part of what English people then regarded as a cosmopolitan set. In this novel, Ertzberger, the heroine's financial adviser, is Jewish and portrayed with some admiration as deeply concerned, in a quite disinterested way, for her welfare. The charge, sometimes made, that Buchan was anti-Semitic does not stand up. In his world Jews were simply different sorts of people to Gentiles and when he writes of Ertzberger having 'the imaginative quickness of his race, but the dominant impression was of good solid sense' we have to know that he would probably have given Leithen more critical impressions of Germans or Russians.

In Buchan's world a gentleman's career prospects were limited: the army or the Royal Navy; the church or academe; the Bar; politics; or, if a bit desperate, the civil service or the City. Manufacturing and trade upon which British pre-eminence was built were viewed as careers, important of course, but for other people. The British rulers of India referred to the indispensable white business community as *box wallahs*. Dr Arnold, the Victorian headmaster of Rugby School, had said he could take the son of a successful tradesman and in three generations create a gentleman. P.G. Wodehouse has little to tell us of Bertie Wooster's antecedents. But it is possible to imagine that they made their money in textiles or bathroom fittings, travelling the world to sell their products while British civilisation trailed in their wake: gentlemen who founded entrepots, more often by treaty than conquest; gentlemen who officered colonial armies;

gentlemen who installed the rule of law as they understood it. Young Bertie Wooster had many unearned thousands in the funds. He had his man Jeeves and his club Drones. Work was as foreign to him as a badly cut suit. His greatest trials came from his Aunt Agatha, she 'who breakfasted on broken glass and wore barbed wire next to the skin'. It took Bertie's man Jeeves (not a gentleman, but a gentleman's gentleman), with his brilliant stratagems, to defeat her.

Edward Leithen and Vernon Milburne, in *The Dancing Floor*, were cut from very different cloth. When the call to duty came, they could be counted on to be there, their brains and muscle guaranteed by double firsts and 'blues' from Oxbridge. No obstacle daunted them. No risk was too great and when the Oxford Union voted not to fight for king and empire, the German ambassador, von Ribbentrop, proved seriously mistaken in believing them. For when war was resumed the whole British nation, virtually without exception, alongside the Hannays and the Leithens, the Churchills and Alexanders, and 'such great men as these' held the bridge for civilisation.

Such a great man was John Buchan himself who, when war broke out in 1939, was Governor-General of Canada, a Scottish viceroy for what was then still an overwhelmingly Scottish dominion. His career at the English Bar and at the Westminster parliament, where he was MP for Perth, had gained him a peerage as Lord Tweedsmuir. It may be that his innovative ideas and lively contributions in committee made his Conservative party colleagues nervous. For he never became a minister. His was still a party where it was preferable to be 'sound' than to be thought 'too clever by half'. But what could not be ignored was that this (probable) spymaster, lawyer and politician was also one of the most famous and prolific British novelists of his time. He had published four books before he left Oxford and went on to write one virtually every year till his death in Ottawa in 1940. Given the breadth of his experience and fame, he could not be denied high office.

But looking at his portrait in Rideau Hall in Ottawa – his ramrod slim figure clothed in his viceregal uniform, glittering

with all his many orders and decorations, and his fine, hawk-like face gazing steadfastly at the crowds of Canadians and tourists who pass by – it is hard to see in him the sensitive writer who was so very tuned in to the natural world and the metaphysical.

His descriptions, in *The Dancing Floor*, of the Greek island on which much of the action takes place, is informed by a knowledge of the region's ancient history, as familiar to the classicist in Buchan as if it had happened but the day before yesterday. He poses the beguiling possibility that the religion of Greece's old gods, beautiful and terrible, can return because it is sometimes closer to the needs of the human condition than monotheism. It is not that the god of the Christians, Muslims and Jews cannot be a jealous god or an avenging god. We can ascribe to him any human emotion we know. It is just that the Greek pantheon was a cast of characters for whom Homer and others had written an intensely human saga. If it is possible for gods to imitate men and women, and for mortals to be cast as gods, the human imagination can find scenarios to cure all ills, to avenge all wrongs and to bring the peace, perfect peace, that everybody wants. But only if . . .

Buchan plucks threads from mythology and weaves a spell set on a Greek island where even the flora seems part of the plot: 'Rivers of narcissus and iris and anemone flooded over the crest . . . The ground was warm under the short herbage, and from it came the rich, clean, savour of earth quickening after its winter sleep under the spell of the sun.' We can almost smell it. Magic is in the air. Terrible, wonderful things are about to happen. John Buchan is at it again.

Robin Hardy
April 2007

ONE

This story was told me by Leithen, as we were returning rather late in the season from a shooting holiday in North Ontario. There were few passengers, the weather was a succession of snow blizzards and gales, and as we had the smoking-room for the most part to ourselves, we stoked up the fire and fell into a mood of yarns and reminiscences. Leithen, being a lawyer, has a liking for careful detail, and his tale took long in the telling; indeed, snatches of it filled the whole of that rough October passage. The version I have written out is amplified from his narrative, but I think it is accurate, for he took the trouble to revise it.

Romance (he said) is a word I am shy of using. It has been so staled and pawed by fools that the bloom is gone from it, and to most people it stands for a sugary world as flat as an eighteenth-century Arcadia. But, dry stick as I am, I hanker after my own notion of romance. I suppose it is the lawyer in me, but I define it as something in life which happens with an exquisite aptness and a splendid finality, as if Fate had suddenly turned artist – something which catches the breath because it is so wholly right. Also for me it must happen to youth. I do not complain of growing old, but I like to keep my faith that at one stage in our mortal existence nothing is impossible. It is part of my belief that the universe is on the whole friendly to man and that the ordering of the world is in the main benevolent . . . So I go about expecting things, waiting like an old pagan for the descent of the goddess. And once – only once – I caught the authentic shimmer of her wings.

I

My story begins in January 1913, when I took my nephew Charles to dine with the Amysforts for a ball they were giving. Balls are not much in my line, for when I came first to London it was the foolish fashion of young men not to dance, but to lounge superciliously in doorways, while their elders took the floor. I had a good deal of work on hand, and I meant to leave immediately after dinner, but the necessity of launching Charles made me linger through the first few dances. My nephew was a cheerful young gentleman in his second year at Oxford, and it presently appeared that he did not want for friends of his own age. There was a perpetual bandying of nicknames and occult chaff with other fresh-coloured boys.

One in particular caught my attention. He was a tall young man of about Charles's age, who was not dancing but stood beside one of the windows with his head silhouetted against a dark curtain. He was uncommonly handsome after the ordinary English pattern, but our youth is mostly good to behold and that would not have fixed my attention. What struck me was his pose. He was looking at the pretty spectacle with a curious aloofness – with eyes that received much but gave out nothing. I have never seen anyone so completely detached, so clothed with his own atmosphere, and since that is rare at the age of twenty, I asked Charles if he knew him.

'Rather. It's old Milburne. He's up at Magdalen with me. First string for the 'Varsity mile. Believed' – his voice became reverential – 'to be going to knock five seconds off his last year's time. Most awful good chap. Like me to introduce you?'

The young man in response to my nephew's beckoning approached us. 'Hello, Vernon, how's life?' said my nephew. 'Want to introduce you to my uncle – Sir Edward Leithen – big legal swell, you know – good fellow to have behind you if you run up against the laws of England.'

Charles left us to claim a partner, and I exchanged a few commonplaces with his friend, for I too – *consule Planco* – had

run the mile. Our short talk was the merest platitudes, but my feeling about his odd distinction was intensified. There was something old-fashioned in his manner – wholly self-possessed yet with no touch of priggishness – a little formal, as if he had schooled himself to be urbanely and delicately on his guard. My guess at the time was that he had foreign blood in him, not from any difference of colouring or feature, but from his silken reserve. We of the North are apt to be angular in our silences; we have not learned the art of gracious reticence.

That boy's face remained clearly fixed in my memory. It is a thing that often happens to me, for without any reason on earth I will carry about with me pictures of some casual witnesses or clients whom I am bound to recognise if I ever see them again. It is as freakish a gift as that which makes some men remember scraps of doggerel. I saw the face so vividly in my mind that, if I had been an artist, I could have drawn it accurately down to the finest lines of the mouth and the wary courtesy of the eyes. I do not suppose I gave the meeting another conscious thought, for I was desperately busy at the time. But I knew that I had added another portrait to the lumber-room of my absurd memory.

I had meant to go to Scotland that Easter vacation to fish, but a sudden pressure of Crown cases upset all my plans, and I had to limit my holiday to four days. I wanted exercise, so I took it in the most violent form, and went for a walk in the Westmorland hills. The snow lay late that year, and I got the exercise I sought scrambling up icy gullies and breasting north-easters on the long bleak ridges. All went well till the last day, which I spent among the Cartmel fells, intending to catch a train at an obscure station which would enable me to join the night mail for London at Lancaster. You know how those little hills break down in stony shelves to the sea. Well, as luck would have it, I stepped into a hole between two boulders masked with snow, and crawled out with the unpleasing certainty that I had either broken or badly wrenched my ankle. By the time I had hobbled down to the beginning of the stone-walled pastures I knew that it was a twist and not a

break, but before I reached a road I knew also that I would never reach the station in time for my train.

It had begun to snow again, the spring dusk was falling, and the place was very lonely. My watch told me that even if I found a farm or inn and hired a trap I should miss my train. The only chance was to get a motor-car to take me to Lancaster. But there was no sign of farm or inn – only interminable dusky snowy fields, and the road was too small and obscure to make a friendly motor-car probable. I limped along in a very bad temper. It was not a matter of desperate urgency that I should be in London next morning, though delay would mean the postponement of a piece of business I wanted to get finished. But the prospect was black for my immediate comfort. The best I could look forward to was a bed in a farm- or a wayside public-house, and a slow and painful journey next day. I was angry with myself for my clumsiness. I had thought my ankles beyond reproach, and it was ridiculous that after three days on rough and dangerous mountains I should come to grief on a paltry hillock.

The dusk thickened, and not a soul did I meet. Presently woods began to creep around the road, and I walked between two patches of blackness in a thin glimmer of twilight which would soon be gone. I was cold and hungry and rather tired, and my ankle gave me a good deal of pain. I tried to think where I was, and could only remember that the station, which had been my immediate objective, was still at least six miles distant. I had out my map and wasted half a dozen matches on it, but it was a map of the hill country and stopped short of my present whereabouts. Very soon I had come to a determination to stop at the first human habitation, were it a labourer's cottage, and throw myself upon the compassion of its inmates. But not a flicker of light could I see to mark the presence of man.

Then something white glimmered faintly on my left, and I saw that it was a wicket gate. This must mean a house near at hand, so I hopefully pushed it open and entered. I found myself in a narrow path running among fir-trees. It was nearly pitch-dark in that place, and I was in fear of losing the road, which was

obscured by the fallen snow, and getting lost in a wood. Soon, however, I was clear of the firs and in more open country among what looked like beeches. The wind, too, had swept the path bare, and there was just enough light to make it out as it twined up and down a little glade. I suspected that I was in a demesne of some considerable house and the suspicion became a certainty when my track emerged on a broad gravel drive. After that my way was clear. The drive took me into a park – I knew it was a park because of the frequent swing-gates for cattle – and suddenly it bore to the right and I saw half a dozen irregularly placed lights high up in the air before me. This was the house, and it must be a large one, for some of the lights were far apart.

Five minutes later I found myself ringing the bell in a massive pillared porch, and explaining my case to a very old butler, to whom I gave my card.

'I've had an accident on the hills,' I said, 'and twisted my ankle rather badly. I wonder if I might ask for some assistance – to get to an inn or a station. I'm afraid I don't in the least know where I am.'

'This is Severns Hall, sir,' said the man. 'My master is Mr Vernon Milburne. If you will come in, sir, I will acquaint him with the position.'

'Mr Vernon Milburne?' I cried. 'I believe I have met him. I think he is at Oxford with my nephew.'

'Mr Milburne is a member of the University of Oxford,' said the ancient man. He led me into a vast hall of the worst kind of Victorian Gothic, in which a big bright wood fire crackled. When he saw me clearly the butler proved a very angel of mercy. 'I think, sir, you should first have a little refreshment,' he said, and brought me a whisky-and-soda. Then, while I thawed my frozen bones before the logs, he departed to seek his master.

I was too preoccupied with my own grievances to feel much interest in the fact that I had stumbled upon the dwelling of the boy who had so intrigued me at Lady Amysfort's ball. But as I warmed my hands at the blaze it did occur to me that this was the last kind of house I would have linked him with – this sham-

medieval upholstered magnificence. It was Gothic with every merit of Gothic left out, and an air of dull ecclesiasticism hung about it. There was even an organ at one end, ugly and staring, as if it had come out of some *nouveau riche* provincial church. Every bit of woodwork was fretted and tortured into fancy shapes.

I heard a voice at my elbow.

'I think we have met before, Sir Edward,' it said. 'I am so sorry for your misfortune. Let's get the boot off and look at the ankle.'

'It's only a sprain,' I said. 'I really don't want to bother you. If you would be so very kind as to lend me a car to take me to Lancaster, I can manage to travel all right. I ought to be in London tomorrow morning.'

'Nonsense!' He smiled in a pleasant boyish way. 'You are going to stay here tonight, and if you're well enough I'll send you into Lancaster tomorrow. You look simply fagged out. Let's get the boot off and see if we need a doctor.'

He summoned the butler, and the two of them soon had my foot bare, while the boy, who seemed to know something about sprains, ran a light hand over the ankle bone.

'Nothing very bad here,' he said: 'but it must have been jolly painful to walk with. We'll bandage it and you need only limp for a day or two. Beaton, find out if Sir Edward's room is ready. You'd better have a hot bath and then we'll do the bandaging. After that you'll want some food. I'll lend you a dressing-gown and dry clothes.'

The next hour was spent in restoring me to some ease of body. Severns might be an ugly house, but whoever built it had a pretty notion of comfort in bedrooms. I had two rooms, each with a cheerful fire, and when I had had my bath the two Samaritans bandaged my ankle as neatly as a hospital nurse, and helped me into a suit of flannels. Then Vernon disappeared, and when he returned he was dressed for dinner. A table had been laid for me in the sitting-room, and Beaton was waiting to ask me what I would drink.

'Champagne,' said Vernon. 'I prescribe it.'

'But you're making far too much fuss about me,' I protested. 'I can easily dine downstairs with you.'

'I think you ought to dine here. You've put yourself in my hands and I'm your medical adviser.'

He saw me start my meal before he left me.

'Do you mind if I say good night now?' he said. 'You ought to get to bed pretty soon and I have some work I want to do after dinner. Sound sleep and pleasant dreams.'

I dined excellently, and after a single pipe was resolutely put to bed by Beaton the butler. They were benevolent despots in this house who were not to be gainsaid. I was sufficiently weary to be glad to go to sleep, but before I dropped off I wondered just a little at the nature of my reception. There were no other guests, Beaton had told me, and it seemed odd that a boy of nineteen alone in this Gothic mausoleum should show so little desire for human companionship. I should have expected, even if I were not allowed downstairs, to have had him come and talk to me for an hour or so before turning in. What work had he to which he was so faithful? I remembered that Charles had mentioned that he was a bit of a swell at his books, but, as Charles himself had been ploughed for Pass Mods, that might mean very little. Anyhow, there was something morbid about a conscience which at nineteen forced its possessor to work in vacation time after dinner. He had been immensely hospitable, but obviously he had not wanted my company. That aloofness which I had remarked at Lady Amysfort's ball had become a heavy preoccupation. His attitude had been courteously defensive: there had been a screen which robbed his kindness of all geniality. I felt quite distinctly that there was something in or about the house, something connected with himself, from which I was being resolutely excluded.

I slept well, and was awakened by Beaton bringing my early tea. He had undrawn the curtains and opened one of the windows, and a great flood of sunlight and spring airs was pouring through. The storm had passed and April was in her most generous mood. My ankle felt lumpish and stiff, but when

Beaton examined it he pronounced that it was mending nicely. 'But you can't press on it today, sir,' he added. 'Mr Vernon won't let you move today . . . Breakfast will be laid in the sitting-room, and Mr Vernon's compliments and he proposes to join you at nine o'clock. I will return and bandage the ankle and assist you to rise as soon as Prayers are over.'

Presently, as I lay watching a ridge of distant hills seen through the window and trying to decide what it could be, the sound of singing rose from some room below me. It must be Prayers. The old-fashioned hymn tune reminded me of my childhood and I wondered how many young men of today kept up the fashion of family worship when alone in a country house. And then I suddenly remembered all about the Milburnes, for they had been my mother's friends.

Humphrey Milburne had been a rich Lancashire cotton-spinner, whose father or grandfather – I forget which – had been one of the pioneers of the industry. I don't think he had ever concerned himself greatly with business, for his *métier* had always been that of the devout layman who is more occupied with church affairs than any bishop. He had been a leader of the Evangelical party, a vigorous opponent of ritualist practices, and a noted organizer of religious revivals. Vague memories of him came back to me from my childhood, for my own family had been of the same persuasion. I had a recollection of a tall bearded man who on a visit to us had insisted on seeing the children, and had set me on his knee, and had asked me, a shivering self-conscious mite, embarrassing questions about my soul. I remembered his wife, Lady Augusta, more clearly. She was a thin little woman who never seemed to be separated from a large squashy Bible stuffed with leaflets and secured by many elastic bands. She had had a knack of dropping everything as she moved, and I had acted as page to retrieve her belongings. She had been very kind to me, for to her grief she had then no children . . . I remembered that a son had at last been born – 'a child of many prayers', my mother had called him. And then came a vague recollection of a tragedy. Lady Augusta had died

when the boy was an infant and her husband had followed within the year. After that the Milburnes passed out of my life, except that their nurse had come to us when I was at Eton, and had had much to say of young Master Vernon.

My vague remembrance seemed to explain my host. The child of ageing parents and an orphan from his early years – that would account for his lack of youthful spontaneity. I liked the notion of him I was acquiring; there was something quaint and loyal in his keeping up the family ritual – an evangelical athlete with the looks of Apollo. I had fancied something foreign in his air, but that of course was nonsense. He came of the most prosaic British stock, cotton-spinning Milburnes, and for his mother a Douglas-Ernott, whose family was the quintessence of Whig solidity.

I found Vernon waiting for me in the sunny sitting-room, dressed in rough grey homespun and with an air of being ready for a long day in the open. There was a change in him since the night before. His eyes were a little heavy, as if he had slept badly, but the shutters were lifted from them. His manner was no longer constrained, and the slight awkwardness I had felt in his presence was gone. He was now a cheerful communicative undergraduate.

'Beaton says you had a good night, sir, but you mustn't use that foot of yours. You can't think of London today, you know. I've nothing to do except look after you, so you'd better think of me as Charles with a nephew's privileges. It's going to be a clinking fine day, so what do you say to running up in the car to the moors above Shap and listening to the curlews? In the spring they're the jolliest things alive.'

He was a schoolboy now, looking forward to an outing, and we might have been breakfasting in Oxford rooms before going out with the Bicester. I fell into his holiday mood, and forgot to tell him that I had long ago met his parents. He lent me an ulster and helped me downstairs, where he packed me into the front of a big Daimler and got in beside me. In the clear spring sunshine, with the park a chessboard of green grass and melting

snow, and the rooks cawing in the beech tops, Severns looked almost venerable, for its lines were good and the stone was weathering well. He nodded towards the long façades. 'Ugly old thing, when you think of Levens or Sizergh, but it was my grandfather's taste and I mean to respect it. If we get a fine sunset you'll see it light up like an enchanted castle. It's something to be able to see the hills from every window, and to get a glimpse of the sea from the top floor. Goodish sport, too, for we've several miles of salmon and sea trout, and we get uncommon high birds in the upper coverts.'

We sped up by winding hill-roads to the moors, and there were the curlews crying over the snow-patched bent with that note which is at once eerie and wistful and joyful. There were grouse, too, busy about their nesting, and an occasional stone-chat, and dippers flashing their white waistcoats in every beck. It was like being on the roof of the world, with the high Lake hills a little foreshortened, like ships coming over the horizon at sea. Lunch we had with us and ate on a dry bank of heather, and we had tea in a whitewashed moorland farm. I have never taken to anyone so fast as I took to that boy. He was in the highest spirits, as if he had finished some difficult task, and in the rebound he became extraordinarily companionable. I think he took to me also, for he showed a shy but intense interest in my doings, the eagerness with which an undergraduate prospects the channels of the world's life which he is soon to navigate. I had been prepared to find a touch of innocent priggishness, but there was nothing of the kind. He seemed to have no dogmas of his own, only inquiries.

'I suppose a lawyer's training fits a man to examine all kinds of problems – not only legal ones,' he asked casually at luncheon. 'I mean he understands the value of any sort of evidence, for the principles of logical proof are always the same?'

'I suppose so,' I replied, 'though it's only legal conundrums that come my way. I was once asked my opinion on a scientific proof – in the higher mathematics – but I didn't make much of it – couldn't quite catch on to the data or understand the language.'

'Yes, that might be a difficulty,' he admitted. 'But a thing like a ghost story for instance – you'd be all right at that, I suppose?'

The boy had clearly something in his head, and I wondered if the raw magnificence of Serverns harboured any spooks. Could that be the reason of his diffidence on the previous evening?

When we got home we sat smoking by the library fire, and while I skimmed *The Times* Vernon dozed. He must have been short of his sleep and was now making up for it in the way of a healthy young man. As I watched his even breathing I decided that here there could be no abnormality of body or mind. It was like watching a tired spaniel on the rug, too tired even to hunt in his dreams.

As I lifted my eyes from the paper I saw that he was awake and was looking at me intently, as if he were hesitating about asking me some question.

'I've been asleep,' he apologised. 'I can drop off anywhere after a day on the hills.'

'You were rather sleepless as a child, weren't you?' I asked.

His eyes opened. 'I wonder how you know that?'

'From your old nurse. I ought to have told you that in my boyhood I knew your parents a little. They stayed with us more than once. And Mrs Ganthony came to my mother from you. I was at Eton at the time, and I remember how she used to entertain us with stories about Severns. You must have been an infant when she left.'

'I was four. What sort of things did she tell you?'

'About your bad nights and your pluck. I fancy it was by way of censure of our declamatory habits. Why, after all these years I remember some of her phrases. How did the thing go? ''What fidgeted me was the way his lordship 'eld his tongue. For usual he'd shout as lusty as a whelp, but on these mornings I'd find him with his eyes like moons and his skin white and shiny, and never a cheep the whole blessed night, with me lying next door, and a light sleeper at all times, Mrs Wace, ma'am.'' Was Mrs Wace a sort of Mrs Harris?'

He laughed merrily. 'To think that you should have heard

that! No, she was our housekeeper, and Ganthony, who babbled like Sairey Gamp, made a litany of her name. That's the most extraordinary thing I ever heard.'

'You've outgrown that childish ailment anyhow,' I said.

'Yes, I have outgrown it.' My practice with witnesses made me detect just a shade of hesitation.

At dinner he returned to the subject which seemed to interest him, the exact nature of the legal training. I told him that I was an advocate, not a judge, and so had no need to cultivate a judicial mind.

'But you can't do without it,' he protested. 'You have to advise your client and pronounce on his case before you argue it. The bulk of your work must be the weighing of evidence. I should have thought that that talent could be applied to any subject in the world if the facts were sufficiently explained. In the long run the most abstruse business will boil down to a fairly simple deduction from certain data. Your profession enables you to select the relevant data.'

'That may be true in theory but I wouldn't myself rate legal talent so high. A lawyer is apt to lack imagination, you know.' Then I stopped, for I had suddenly the impression that Vernon wanted advice, help of some kind – that behind all his ease he was profoundly anxious, and that a plea, almost a cry, was trembling on his lips. I detest confidences and labour to avoid them, but I could no more refuse this boy than stop my ears against a sick child. So I added, 'Of course lawyers make good confidants. They're mostly decent fellows, and they're accustomed to keeping their mouths shut.'

He nodded, as if I had settled some private scruple, and we fell to talking about spring salmon in the Tay.

'Take the port into the library,' he told Beaton. 'Sir Edward doesn't want coffee. Oh, and see that the fire is good. We shan't need you again tonight. I'll put Sir Edward to bed.'

There was an odd air of purpose about him, as he gave me his arm to the library and settled me with a cigar in a long chair. Then he disappeared for a minute or two and returned with a

shabby little clasped leather book. He locked the door and put the key on the mantelpiece, and when he caught me smiling he smiled too, a little nervously.

'Please don't think me an ass,' he said. 'I'm going to ask a tremendous favour. I want you to listen to me while I tell you a story, something I have never told to anyone in my life before . . . I don't think you'll laugh at me, and I've a notion you may be able to help me. It's a confounded liberty, I know, but may I go on?'

'Most certainly,' I said. 'I can't imagine myself laughing at anything you had to tell me; and if there's anything in me that can help you it's yours for the asking.'

He drew a long breath. 'You spoke of my bad nights as a child and I said I had outgrown them. Well, it isn't true.'

2

When Vernon was a very little boy he was the sleepiest and healthiest of mortals, but every spring he had a spell of bad dreams. He slept at that time in the big new night-nursery at the top of the west wing, which his parents had built not long before their death. It had three windows looking out to the moorish flats which run up to the fells, and from one window, by craning your neck, you could catch a glimpse of the sea. It was all hung, too, with a Chinese paper whereon pink and green parrots squatted in wonderful blue trees, and there seemed generally to be a wood fire burning. He described the place in detail, not as it is today, but as he remembered it.

Vernon's recollection of his childish nightmares was hazy. They varied, I gathered, but narrowed down in the end to one type. He used to find himself in a room different from the nursery and bigger, but with the same smell of wood smoke. People came and went, such as his nurse, the butler, Simon the head keeper, Uncle Appleby his guardian, Cousin Jennifer, the old woman who sold oranges in Axby, and a host of others. Nobody hindered them from going away, and they seemed to be

pleading with him to come too. There was danger in the place; something was going to happen in the big room, and if by that time he was not gone there would be mischief . . . But it was quite clear to him that he could not go. He must stop there, with the wood smoke in his nostrils, and await the advent of the something. But he was never quite sure of the nature of the compulsion. He had a notion that if he made a rush for the door at Uncle Appleby's heels he would be allowed to escape, but that somehow he would be behaving badly. Anyhow, the place put him into a sweat of fright, and Mrs Ganthony looked darkly at him in the morning.

Those troubled springs continued – odd interludes in a life of nearly unbroken health. Mrs Ganthony left because she could not control her tongue and increased the boy's terrors, and Vernon was nine – he thought – before the dream began to take a really definite shape. The stage was emptying. There was nobody in the room now but himself, and he saw its details a little more clearly. It was not any apartment in Severns. Rather it seemed like one of the big old panelled chambers which he remembered from visits to the Midland country houses of his mother's family, when he had arrived after dark and had been put to sleep in a great bed in a place lit with dancing firelight. In the morning it had looked only an ordinary big room, but at that hour of the evening it had seemed an enchanted cave. The dream-room was not unlike these, for there was the scent of a wood fire and there were dancing shadows, but he could not see clearly the walls or the ceiling, and there was no bed. In one corner was a door which led to the outer world, and through this he knew that he might on no account pass. Another door faced him, and he knew that he had only to turn the handle for it to open.

But he did not want to, for he understood quite clearly what was beyond. There was a second room just like the first one; he knew nothing about it except that opposite the entrance another door led out of it. Beyond was a third chamber, and so on interminably. There seemed to the boy to be no end to this

fantastic suite. He thought of it as a great snake of masonry, winding up hill and down dale away to the fells or the sea . . . Yes, but there *was* an end. Somewhere far away in one of the rooms was a terror waiting on him, or, as he feared, coming towards him. Even now it might be flitting from room to room, every minute bringing its soft tread nearer to the chamber of the wood fire.

About this time of his life the dream was an unmitigated horror. Once it came while he was ill with a childish fever, and it sent his temperature up to a point which brought Dr Moreton galloping from Axby. In his waking hours he did not, as a rule, remember it clearly; but during the fever, asleep and awake, that sinuous building, one room thick, with each room opening from the other, was never away from his thoughts. It amazed him to think that outside were the cheerful moors where he hunted for plovers' eggs, and that only a thin wall of stone kept him from pleasant homely things. The thought used to comfort him when he was awake, but in the dream it never came near him. Asleep, the whole world seemed one suite of rooms, and he, a forlorn little prisoner, doomed grimly to wait on the slow coming through the many doors of a fear which transcended word and thought.

He became a silent, self-absorbed boy, and, though the fact of his nightmares was patent to the little household, the details remained locked up in his head. Not even to Uncle Appleby would he tell them, when that gentleman, hurriedly kind, came to visit his convalescent ward. His illness made Vernon grow, and he shot up into a lanky, leggy boy. But the hills soon tautened his sinews, and all the time at his preparatory school he was a healthy and active child. He told me that he tried to exorcise the dream through his religion – to 'lay his burden on the Lord', as the old evangelical phrase has it; but he signally failed, though he got some comfort from the attempt. It was borne in on him, he said, that this was a burden which the Lord had laid quite definitely on him and meant him to bear like a man.

He was fifteen and at Eton when he made the great discovery. The dream had become almost a custom now. It came in April at Severns about Easter-tide – a night's discomfort (it was now scarcely more) in the rush and glory of the holidays. There was a moment of the old wild heart-fluttering; but a boy's fancy is more quickly dulled than a child's, and the endless corridors were now more of a prison than a witch's antechamber. By this time, with the help of his diary, he had fixed the date of the dream; it came regularly on the night of the first Monday of April. Now the year I speak of he had made a long expedition into the hills, and had stridden homeward at a steady four miles an hour among the gleams and shadows of an April twilight. He was alone at Severns, so he had had his supper in the big library, where afterwards he sat watching the leaping flames on the open stone hearth. He was very weary, and sleep fell upon him in his chair. He found himself in the wood-smoke chamber, and before him the door leading to the unknown . . . But it was no indefinite fear that now lay beyond. He knew clearly – though how he knew he could not tell – that each year the something came a room nearer, and was even now but twelve rooms off. In twelve years his own door would open, and then—

He woke in the small hours, chilled and mazed, but with a curious new assurance in his heart. Hitherto the nightmare had left him in gross terror, unable to endure the prospect of its recurrence, till the kindly forgetfulness of youth relieved him. But now, though his nerves were fluttering, he perceived that there was a limit to the mystery. Some day it must declare itself and fight on equal terms.

The discovery opened a new stage in his life. As he thought over the matter in the next few days he had the sense of being forewarned and prepared for some great test of courage. The notion exhilarated as much as it frightened him. Late at night, or on soft dripping days, or at any moment of lessened vitality, he would bitterly wish that he had been born an ordinary mortal. But on a keen morning of frost, when he rubbed himself warm after a cold tub, or at high noon of summer, the adventure of the

dream almost pleased him. Unconsciously he must have braced himself to a harder discipline. His fitness, moral and physical, became his chief interest for reasons that would have been unintelligible to his friends or his masters.

He passed through school – as I knew from Charles – an aloof and rather splendid figure, a magnificent athlete with a brain as well as a body, a good fellow in everyone's opinion, but a grave one. He could have had no real intimates, for he never shared the secret of the spring dream. At this period, for some reason which he could not tell, he would have burned his hand off sooner than breathe a hint of it. Pure terror absolves from all conventions and demands a confidant, so terror, I think, must have largely departed from the nightmare as he grew older. Fear, indeed, remained, and awe and disquiet, but these are human emotions, whereas terror is of hell.

Had he told anyone, he would no doubt have become self-conscious and felt acutely his difference from other people, so it was a sound instinct which kept him silent. As it was, he seems to have been an ordinary schoolboy, much liked, and, except at odd moments, unaware of any brooding destiny. As he grew older, and his ambition awoke, the moments when he remembered the dream were apt to be disagreeable, for a boy's ambitions are strictly conventional and his soul revolts at the abnormal. By the time he was ready for the university he wanted above all things to run the mile a second faster than anyone else, and he had hopes of academic distinction, for he was an excellent classic. For most of the year he lived with these hopes and was happy: then came April, and for a short season he was groping in dark places. Just before and after each dream he was in a mood of exasperation; but when it actually came he was plunged in a different atmosphere, and felt the quiver of fear and the quick thrill of expectation.

During his first year at Oxford he had made an attempt to avoid it. He and three others were on a walking tour in Brittany in gusty spring weather, and came late one evening to an inn by an estuary where sea-gulls clattered about the windows. Youth-

like they made a great and foolish feast, and sat all night round a bowl of punch, while school songs and 'John Peel' contended with the dirling of the gale. At daylight they took the road again, without having closed an eye, and Vernon told himself that he was rid of his incubus. He wondered at the time why he was not more cheerful, for to his surprise he had a sense of loss, of regret, almost of disappointment.

'That was last year,' he said, and he opened the little locked diary and showed me the entry. 'Last night I went to bed not knowing what to think, but far more nervous than I had been since I was a baby. I hope I didn't show it, but I wasn't much in the mood for guests when you turned up.'

'What happened?' I asked eagerly. 'Did the dream come back?'

He nodded and passed me the diary so that I could read that morning's entry. The dream had not failed him. Once more he had been in the chamber with the wood fire: once again he had peered at the door and wondered with tremulous heart what lay beyond. For the something had come nearer by two rooms, and was now only seven doors away. I read the bare account in his neat, precise handwriting, and it gave me a strong impression of being permitted to peep through a curtain at a stage mysteriously set. I noticed that he had added some lines from Keats's 'Indian Maid's Song':

> I would deceive her,
> And so leave her.
> But ah! she is so constant and so kind.

There was a mark of exclamation against the 'she', as if he found some irony in it.

3

He seemed to be waiting for me to speak, waiting shyly and tensely like a child expecting the judgement of an elder. But I found it hard to know what to say.

'That is a very wonderful story!' I ventured at last. 'I am honoured that you should have chosen me to tell it to. Perhaps it will be a relief to you to know that someone else understands what you are going through . . . I don't suppose you want sympathy, but I would like to congratulate you on your fortitude.'

'I don't need sympathy – or congratulation. But I want help – the help of your brain and your experience . . . You see, in seven years some tremendous experience is coming to me, and I want – I'd like – to know what it is.'

'I wonder if a good doctor wouldn't be the best person to consult.'

'No, no,' he cried almost angrily. 'I tell you there's nothing pathological about it – not now that I'm a man. I don't want it exorcised as if it were an evil spell. I think – now – that I'd break my heart if it all vanished into moonshine . . . I believe in it as I believe in God, and I'm ready to face whatever is coming. But I want to be forewarned and forearmed, if possible, for it's going to be a big thing. If I only knew something about what was coming – even the smallest something!'

Those were the days before psychoanalysis had become fashionable, but even then we had psychologists, and in my bewilderment I tried that tack.

'Might not it all spring from some fright – some strange experience at any rate – which you had as a baby? Such things often make an abiding impression.'

He smiled. 'You're still thinking it is pathological. Fright would account for recurring nightmares, but surely not for a thing so rational as this – a fixed day every year, the same room, the time limit. It would not explain the thing moving on a room last year when I had no dream.'

'I suppose not,' I admitted. 'Have you looked up your family history? I have heard stories of inherited obsessions and premonitions – what they call a "weird" in Scotland.'

'I thought of that, but there's nothing – nothing. There are no Milburne records much beyond my grandfather, and by all

accounts they were the most prosaic kind of businessmen. My mother's family – well, there's plenty of records there and I've waded through most of the muniment room at Appleby. But there's no hint of anything mysterious in the Douglas-Ernotts. They were a time-serving lot, who knew how the cat was going to jump, but they kept out of crime and shunned anything imaginative like the plague. I shouldn't think one of them had ever an ambition which couldn't be put in terms of office or money, or a regret except that he had missed a chance of getting at the public purse. True-blue Whigs, all of them.'

'Then I'm hanged if I know what to say. But, now you've told me, I want you to remember that you can always count on me. I may not be able to help, but I'm there whenever you want me. Perhaps – you never know – the thing will reveal itself more clearly in the next seven years and come within the scope of my help. I've taken a tremendous liking to you, my dear chap, and we're going to be friends.'

He held out his hand.

'That's kind of you . . . Shall I tell you what I think myself? I was taught to believe that everything in our lives is foreordained by God. No caprice of our own can alter the eternal plan. Now, why shouldn't some inkling of this plan be given us now and then – not knowledge, but just an inkling that we may be ready? My dream may be a heavenly warning, a divine foreshadowing – a privilege, not a cross. It is a reminder that I must be waiting with girt loins and a lit lamp when the call comes. That's the way I look on it, and it makes me happy.'

I said nothing, for I did not share his Calvinism, but I felt that suddenly that library had become rather a solemn place. I had listened to the vow of the young Hannibal at the altar.