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Opening Extract from...

Midwinter

Written by John Buchan

Introduction by Stuart Kelly

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Introduction

In his autobiography, *Memory Hold-the-Door*, John Buchan looked back on his writing career, and the difference between his successful 'shockers' and his more literary works. 'These were serious books,' he wrote, 'and they must have puzzled many of the readers who were eager to follow the doings of Richard Hannay and Dickson McCunn. That is the trouble with an author who writes only to please himself; his product is not standardised, and the purchaser is often disappointed. I once had a letter from an Eton boy who, having a taste for a bustling yarn, was indignant at anything of mine that did not conform to their pattern. He earnestly begged me to "pull myself together".' Buchan doesn't specify which of his self-described 'serious books' – *The Free Fishers, Witch Wood, The Blanket of the Dark* and *Midwinter* – occasioned the irate correspondence. But of all his novels, *Midwinter* is the most curious and unsettling. It is an elegiac thriller, a romance about self-control and an historical novel featuring characters outside of history. It is simultaneously sincere and cheeky.

Buchan started *Midwinter* shortly after moving to Elsfield Manor in Oxfordshire, and it was serialised in the *Daily Telegraph* before being published in 1923. He wanted to 'catch the spell of the great Midland forest and the Old England which lay everywhere beyond the highroads and ploughlands'. In a self-published local history, *Cornbury and the Forest of Wychwood*, by his neighbour Vernon Watney, Buchan learned that many Jacobites, including Lord Mansfield, had found sanctuary and assistance in the area after the failure of Charles Edward Stuart's 1745 campaign. Buchan had previously used a Jacobite setting

for *A Lost Lady of Old Years*, and took this hint to revisit the uprising from an unusual new perspective.

The story proper begins with Alastair Maclean, a Highlander in the service of Bonnie Prince Charlie, sent as an advance guard into England to secure the support of the sympathetic gentry. Buchan turns the most famous Jacobite novel, Sir Walter Scott's *Waverley*, systematically inside-out. Instead of an English hero heading north, we have a Scottish hero travelling south. The alien landscape – a place of 'tangled forests', 'unfeatured woodland', 'fathomless mud' and 'jungle' – is the rural Cotswolds, not uncultivated Moray. The 'dozen varieties of dialect' and 'slow burring speech' are in the mouths of the English characters (Maclean even becomes Muck Lane in their tongue), while Alastair speaks formal and correct English. As the novel progresses, these inversions and overturned expectations multiply and proliferate. Waverley's Jacobite dalliance does not exclude him from a happy ending and a respectable marriage: in contrast, the conclusion of *Midwinter* asserts that 'Clear eyes are for men an honourable possession, but they do not make for happiness'.

Just as the vacillating Edward Waverley meets representatives of the different kinds of Scots, the steadfast Maclean is introduced to characters who exemplify Englishness. As well as the fox-hunting and aptly named Squire Thicknesse, Buchan sketches the innkeepers, recruiting sergeants and gamekeepers with deft touches. Part of the charm of *Midwinter* lies in Buchan's inspired idea of having Maclean meet and team up with that acme of 'John Bull' England, Dr Samuel Johnson.

Buchan exploits a lovely loophole in history; the fact that very little is known about Johnson's life in the crucial years 1745–6. His biographer Boswell writes: 'It is somewhat curious, that his literary career appears to have been almost totally suspended in the years 1745 and 1746, those years which were marked by a civil war in Great-Britain, when a rash attempt was made to restore the House of Stuart to the throne. That he had a tenderness for that unfortunate House, is well known; and

some may fancifully imagine, that a sympathetick anxiety impeded the exertion of his intellectual powers.' All we do know is that Johnson published in April 1745 *Miscellaneous Observations on the Tragedy of Macbeth*, which included a proposal for Johnson's edition of *The Plays of Shakespeare* (1765). This announcement brought down the wrath of London's premier publisher, Jacob Tonson, who had the copyright for other editions of Shakespeare and threatened Johnson and his publisher with legal action. To compound Johnson's worries, his pamphlet had the embarrassing misprint SHAKESHEAR on the title page.

Buchan has a lot of fun with Johnson's 'missing years', and in the preface wryly suggests that the events of *Midwinter* explain the Great Cham's notorious antipathy to the Scots. Time and again, the most quotable quotes of Johnson spring to his lips: 'A man may be tired of the country, but when he is tired of London he is tired of life', 'With you, sir, patriotism is the last refuge of the scoundrel' and even 'The end was a proof, if proof were wanted, of the vanity of human wishes'. It's done with such a light and unobtrusive hand that you have to remember the clunky modern historical novels, usually featuring a famous figure as a detective, to appreciate the gracefulness. In a neat and knowing touch, Buchan even has Johnson contemplating the idea that he will 'change his name to MacIan, and be as fierce as any Highlander'.

The other representative of Englishness is the eponymous and mysterious Amos Midwinter, a gentleman who has forsaken his inheritance to live with the gipsies, charcoal-burners, and 'spoonbills' of Old England. He describes it as an England that 'has outlived Roman and Saxon and Dane and Norman and will outlast the Hanoverian. It has seen priest turn to presbyter and presbyter to parson and has only smiled. It is the land of the edge of the moorlands and the rim of the forests and the twilight before dawn.'

Midwinter's secret league, the 'Naked Men', assists Maclean in moments of peril, but remains aloof from the political

machinations. He symbolises a pagan continuity in England, the kind of magical harmony with nature that can be seen in Wayland Smith in Scott's *Kenilworth* and Herne the Hunter in John Masefield's *The Box of Delights*. Oddly, when Buchan returned to the theme of persisting, pre-Christian attitudes in *The Dancing Floor* (1926) and *Witch Wood* (1927), it was in far darker tones: yet in *Midwinter*, the pagan is wholly healthy and beneficent. Midwinter may have foregone civilisation, but not chivalry. The Roman altar that is the focus for black magic in *Witch Wood* is a convivial gathering place in *Midwinter*.

But the England of Buchan's novel is changing, regardless of the futility of the Pretender's campaign. It is no coincidence that the villain of the piece – one of Buchan's most engaging and understandable villains – is motivated by mercantile and bourgeois love of money rather than by ideology or commitment. The curious gothic section when the wicked gypsy Ben threatens to plunge Alastair into a deep pothole he calls 'Journeyman John' has overtones of the coming Industrial Revolution. The pothole makes 'a sound like millstones working under a full press of water'. It grinds away, and nothing comes out but 'threads and buttons'.

The changing nature of England is handled most thoroughly in the wonderful debate between Alastair and his honourable opponent, General Oglethorpe. 'But, sir, there is a new temper in the lands. You may have heard of the people they call Methodists,' he says. 'They preach a hope for the vilest. With them is the key of the new England, for they bring healing to the souls of the people . . . What can your fairy Prince say to the poor and the hungry?'; thus succinctly damning the whole Jacobite enterprise.

Oglethorpe also is given Buchan's most articulate summary of his conservative and high Tory principles: 'I hold this mongering of novelties an invention of the Devil . . . I plead for the English people and I want no change, least of all the violent change of revolution.' In his denunciations of profiteers and time-servers, it's hard not to discern Buchan's own interwar anxieties about the sacrifices of the First World War.

There is a chilly, melancholy tone to the whole novel. From the outset, where the Duchess counsels Alastair – 'You have before you two worlds – the enclosed garden and the wild beyond. The wild is yours, by birthright and training and choice. Beyond the pale is Robin Hood's land, where men adventure. Inside is a quiet domain where they make verses and read books and cherish possessions – my brother's land' – it is clear that the days of derring-do are over. At the beginning, Alastair wonders, 'What did a kestrel in the home of peacocks?', a sentiment which returns at the end, subtly and sadly changed as he predicts the rout at Culloden – 'as hopeless as a battle of a single kestrel against a mob of ravens'.

Even Midwinter's romantic 'Naked Men' must be foregone. Midwinter admits that although 'a naked man travels fast and light, for he has nothing that he can lose', nevertheless 'he is also defenceless and the shod feet of the world can hurt him'. The final offer, of joining the Old England 'which is the refuge of battered men', is tempting, but insufficient. For Buchan, life always has to go on, and escape is an impossibility. If there is a moral to *Midwinter* it may well be the admonition of the Eton schoolboy to Buchan: 'Pull yourself together.'

Reviewing *Midwinter*, the *New York Times* said that 'it is a story that has many merits and few faults, the greatest of which is that it tells too little of Midwinter. Can it be that the author is reserving him for another tale?' Buchan never did return to the mysterious Midwinter, and, in a way, I rather prefer that he remains an enigmatic and haunting presence, glimpsed through blackthorn hedges and disappearing into holloways.

Midwinter may move with the pace and vigour of one of Buchan's shockers, but it is a more mature and sophisticated novel, both morally astute and emotionally complicated. The reader knows the outcome in advance – rather than the 'if' of the thrillers, Buchan explores the 'how' and 'why' of the historical novel. It also lends a quiet irony to many of the characters' aspirations and exchanges: Alastair's final epiphany is of 'the ironic pattern of life spread out beneath, as a man views a

campaign from a mountain, and he came near to laughter – laughter with an undertone of tears'. J.B. Priestley once complained that Buchan's steady stream of popular fiction distracted him from writing a truly great novel: *Midwinter* shows exactly what he was capable of as a novelist. But most of all, *Midwinter* is the finest tribute to English landscape, English customs and English character ever penned by a Scotsman.

Stuart Kelly
July 2008

Preface by the Editor

Last year my friend, Mr Sebastian Derwent, on becoming senior partner of the reputable firm of solicitors which bears his name, instituted a very drastic clearing out of cupboards and shelves in the old house in Lincoln's Inn Fields. Among a mass of derelict papers – cancelled deeds, mouldy files of correspondence, copies of pleadings in cases long ago forgotten – there was one little bundle which mystified him, since it had no apparent relation to the practice of the law. He summoned me to dinner, and, with our chairs drawn up to a bright fire and a decanter of his famous brown sherry between us, we discussed its antecedents.

First there was a document of three quarto pages, which appeared to be a fair copy in a scrivener's hand. It started and finished abruptly, so we judged it to be a portion of a larger work. Then came a long ill-written manuscript, partly in a little volume of which the clasp and lock had been broken, and partly on loose paper which seemed to have been torn from the beginnings and ends of printed books. The paper had no watermark that we could discover, but its quality suggested the eighteenth century. Last there was a bundle of letters in various hands, all neatly docketed and dated. Mr Derwent entrusted me with the papers, for certain words and phrases in the quarto sheets had stirred my interest. After considerable study I discovered that the packet contained a story, obscure in parts, but capable of being told with some pretence of continuity.

First for the matter copied by the amanuensis. It was clearly a fragment, intended by the compiler to form part of an intro-

duction to the work. On first reading it I rubbed my eyes and tasted the joy of the discoverer, for I believed that I had stumbled upon an unknown manuscript of Mr James Boswell, written apparently after the publication of his *Life of Johnson*, and designed for a supplementary volume, which, Dr Johnson being dead, he felt at liberty to compile. On reflection I grew less certain. The thing was undoubtedly the work of an intimate friend of the Great Lexicographer, but, though there were mannerisms of style and thought which suggested Mr Boswell, I did not feel able to claim his authorship with any confidence. It might be the production of one or other of the Wartons, or of Sir Robert Chambers, or of some Oxford friend of Johnson whose name has not come down to us. Mr Derwent at my request explored the records of his firm, which extended back for the better part of a century, but could find no evidence that it had ever done business for any member of the family of Auchinleck. Nevertheless I incline to attribute the thing to Mr Boswell, for he alone of Johnson's circle was likely to have the eager interest in Scotland which the manuscript reveals, and the dates do not conflict with what we know of his movements.

Here, at all events, is the text of it:

> In the last week of June in the year 1763 Johnson was in Oxford, and I had the honour to accompany him one afternoon to the village of Elsfield, some four miles from the city, on a visit to Mr Francis Wise, one of the fellows of Trinity College and Radcliffe's librarian. As I have already mentioned, there were certain episodes in the past life of my illustrious friend as to which I knew nothing, and certain views, nay, I venture to say prejudices, in his mind, for the origin of which I was at a loss to account. In particular I could never receive from him any narrative of his life during the years 1745 and 1746, the years of our last civil war, during which his literary career seems to have been almost totally suspended. When I endeavoured to probe the matter, he answered me with some asperity,

so that I feared to embarrass him with further questions. 'Sir, I was very poor,' he once said, 'and misery has no chronicles.' His reticence on the point was the more vexatious to me, since, though a loyal supporter of the present Monarchy and Constitution, he always revealed a peculiar tenderness towards the unfortunate House of Stuart, and I could not but think that in some episode in his past lay the key to a sentiment which was at variance with his philosophy of government. I was also puzzled to explain to my own mind the reason for his attitude towards Scotland and the Scotch nation, which afforded him matter for constant sarcasms and frequent explosions of wrath. As the world knows, he had a lively interest in the primitive life of the Highlands, and an apparent affection for those parts, but towards the rest of Scotland he maintained a demeanour so critical as to be liable to the reproach of harshness. These prejudices, cherished so habitually that they could not be attributed to mere fits of spleen, surprised me in a man of such pre-eminent justice and wisdom, and I was driven to think that some early incident in his career must have given them birth; but my curiosity remained unsatisfied, for when I interrogated him, I was met with a sullen silence, if we were alone, and, if company were present, a tempestuous ridicule which covered me with blushes.

On this occasion at Elsfield that happened which whetted my curiosity, but the riddle remained unread till at this late stage of my life, when my revered Master has long been dead, fortune has given the key into my hand. Mr Francis Wise dwelt in a small ancient manor of Lord North's, situated on the summit of a hill with a great prospect over the Cherwell valley and beyond it to the Cotswold uplands. We walked thither, and spent the hour before dinner very pleasantly in a fine library, admiring our host's collection of antiquities and turning the pages of a noble folio wherein he had catalogued the coins in the

Bodleian collection. Johnson was in a cheerful humour, the exercise of walking had purified his blood, and at dinner he ate heartily of veal sweetbreads, and drank three or four glasses of Madeira wine. I remember that he commended especially a great ham. 'Sir,' he said, 'the flesh of the pig is most suitable for Englishmen and Christians. Foreigners love it little, Jews and infidels abhor it.'

When the meal was over we walked in the garden, which was curiously beautified with flowering bushes and lawns adorned with statues and fountains. We assembled for tea in an arbour, constructed after the fashion of a Roman temple, on the edge of a clear pool. Beyond the water there was a sharp declivity, which had been utilised to make a cascade from the pool's overflow. This descended to a stone tank like an ancient bath, and on each side of the small ravine lines of beeches had been planted. Through the avenue of the trees there was a long vista of meadows in the valley below, extending to the wooded eminence of the Duke of Marlborough's palace of Blenheim, and beyond to the Cotswold hills. The sun was declining over these hills, and, since the arbour looked to the west, the pool and the cascade were dappled with gold, and pleasant beams escaped through the shade to our refuge.

Johnson was regaled with tea, while Mr Wise and I discussed a fresh bottle of wine. It was now that my eminent friend's demeanour, which had been most genial during dinner, suffered a sudden change. The servant who waited upon us was an honest Oxfordshire rustic with an open countenance and a merry eye. To my surprise I observed Johnson regarding him with extreme disfavour. 'Who is that fellow?' he asked when the man had left us. Mr Wise mentioned his name, and that he was of a family in the village. 'His face reminds me of a very evil scoundrel,' was the reply. 'A Scotchman,' he added.

'But no nation has the monopoly of rogues.'

After that my friend's brow remained cloudy, and he stirred restlessly in his chair, as if eager to be gone. Our host talked of the antiquities in the neighbourhood, notably of the White Horse in Berkshire and of a similar primitive relic in Buckinghamshire, but he could elicit no response, though the subject was one to which I knew Johnson's interest to be deeply pledged. He remained with his chin sunk on his breast, and his eyes moody as if occupied with painful memories. I made anxious inquiries as to his health, but he waved me aside. Once he raised his head, and remained for some time staring across the valley at the declining sun.

'What are these hills?' he asked.

Mr Wise repeated names – Woodstock, Ditchley, Enstone. 'The trees on the extreme horizon,' he said, 'belong to Wychwood Forest.'

The words seemed to add to Johnson's depression. 'Is it so?' he murmured. 'Verily a strange coincidence. Sir, among these hills, which I now regard, were spent some of the bitterest moments of my life.'

He said no more, and I durst not question him, nor did I ever succeed at any later date in drawing him back to the subject. I have a strong recollection of the discomfort of that occasion, for Johnson relapsed into glumness and presently we rose to leave. Mr Wise, who loved talking and displayed his treasures with the zest of the owner of a raree show, would have us visit, before going, a Roman altar which, he said, had lately been unearthed on his estate. Johnson viewed it peevishly, and pointed out certain letters in the inscription which seemed fresher than the rest. Mr Wise confessed that he had himself recut these letters, in conformity, as he believed, with the purpose of the original. This threw Johnson into a transport of wrath. 'Sir,' he said, 'the man who would tamper with an ancient monument, with whatever intentions, is

> capable of defiling his father's tomb.' There was no word uttered between us on the walk back to Oxford. Johnson strode at such a pace that I could scarcely keep abreast of him, and I would fain have done as he did on an earlier occasion, and cried *Sufflamina*.[1]
>
> The incident which I have recorded has always remained vivid in my memory, but I despaired of unravelling the puzzle, and believed that the clue was buried for ever in the grave of the illustrious dead. But, by what I prefer to call Providence rather than Chance, certain papers have lately come into my possession, which enable me to clear up the mystery of that summer evening, to add a new chapter to the life of one of the greatest of mankind, and to portray my dear and revered friend in a part which cannot fail to heighten our conception of the sterling worth of his character.

Thus far the quarto pages. Their author – Mr Boswell or some other – no doubt intended to explain how he received the further papers, and to cast them into some publishable form. Neither task was performed. The rest of the manuscript, as I have said, was orderly enough, but no editorial care had been given it. I have discovered nothing further about Alastair Maclean save what the narrative records, and my research among the archives of Oxfordshire families has not enabled me to add much to the history of the other figures. But I have put such materials as I had into the form of a tale, which seems of sufficient interest to present to the world. I could wish that Mr Boswell had lived to perform the task, for I am confident that he would have made a better job of it.

1 See Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, anno 1754.

ONE

In which a Highland Gentleman Misses His Way

The road which had begun as a rutted cart-track sank presently to a grassy footpath among scrub oaks, and as the boughs whipped his face the young man cried out impatiently and pulled up his horse to consider. He was on a journey where secrecy was not less vital than speed, and he was finding the two incompatible. That morning he had avoided Banbury and the high road which followed the crown of Cotswold to the young streams of Thames, for that way lay Beaufort's country, and at such a time there would be jealous tongues to question passengers. For the same reason he had left the main Oxford road on his right, since the channel between Oxford and the North might well be troublesome, even for a respectable traveller who called himself Mr Andrew Watson, and was ready with a legend of a sea-coal business in Newcastle. But his circumspection seemed to have taken him too far on an easterly course into a land of tangled forests. He pulled out his chart of the journey and studied it with puzzled eyes. My Lord Cornbury's house could not be twenty miles distant, but what if the twenty miles were pathless? An October gale was tossing the boughs and whirling the dead bracken, and a cold rain was beginning. Ill weather was nothing to one nourished among Hebridean north-westers, but he cursed a land in which there were no landmarks. A hill-top, a glimpse of sea or loch, even a stone on a ridge, were things a man could steer by, but what was he to do in this unfeatured woodland? These soft south-country folk stuck to their roads, and the roads were forbidden him.

A little further and the track died away in a thicket of hazels. He drove his horse through the scrub and came out on a glade, where the ground sloped steeply to a jungle of willows, beyond which he had a glimpse through the drizzle of a grey-green fen. Clearly that was not his direction, and he turned sharply to the right along the edge of the declivity. Once more he was in the covert, and his ill-temper grew with every briar that whipped his face. Suddenly he halted, for he heard the sound of speech.

It came from just in front of him – a voice speaking loud and angry, and now and then a squeal like a scared animal's. An affair between some forester and a poaching hind, he concluded, and would fain have turned aside. But the thicket on each hand was impenetrable, and, moreover, he earnestly desired advice about the road. He was hesitating in his mind, when the cries broke out again, so sharp with pain that instinctively he pushed forward. The undergrowth blocked his horse, so he dismounted and, with a hand fending his eyes, made a halter of the bridle and dragged the animal after him. He came out into a little dell down which a path ran, and confronted two human beings.

They did not see him, being intent on their own business. One was a burly fellow in a bottle-green coat, a red waistcoat and corduroy small clothes, from whose gap-toothed mouth issued volleys of abuse. In his clutches was a slim boy in his early teens, a dark sallow slip of a lad, clad in nothing but a shirt and short leather breeches. The man had laid his gun on the ground, and had his knee in the small of the child's back, while he was viciously twisting one arm so that his victim cried like a rabbit in the grip of a weasel. The barbarity of it undid the traveller's discretion.

'Hold there,' he cried, and took a pace forward.

The man turned his face, saw a figure which he recognised as a gentleman, and took his knee from the boy's back, though he still kept a clutch on his arm.

'Sarvant, sir,' he said, touching his hat with his free hand. 'What might 'ee be wanting o' Tom Heather?' His voice was civil, but his face was ugly.

'Let the lad go.'

'Sir Edward's orders, sir – that's Sir Edward Turner, Baronet, of Ambrosden House in this 'ere shire, 'im I 'as the honour to serve. Sir Edward 'e says, "Tom," 'e says, "if 'ee finds a poacher in the New Woods 'ee knows what to do with 'im without troubling me"; and I reckon I does know. Them moor-men is the worst varmints in the country, and the youngest is the black-heartedest, like foxes.'

The grip had relaxed and the boy gave a twist which freed him. Instantly he dived into the scrub. The keeper made a bound after him, thought better of it and stood sullenly regarding the traveller.

'I've been a-laying for the misbegotten slip them five weeks, and now I loses him, and all along of 'ee, sir.' His tones suggested that silver might be a reasonable compensation.

But the young man, disliking his looks, was in no mood for almsgiving, and forgot the need of discretion. Also he came from a land where coin of the realm was scarce.

'If it's your master's orders to torture babes, then you and he can go to the devil. But show me the way out of this infernal wood and you shall have a shilling for your pains.'

At first the keeper seemed disposed to obey, for he turned and made a sign for the traveller to follow. But he swung round again, and, resting the gun which he had picked up in the crook of his arm, he looked the young man over with a dawning insolence in his eyes. He was beginning to see a more profitable turn in the business. The horseman was soberly but reputably dressed, and his beast was good, but what did he in this outlandish place?

'Making so bold,' said the keeper, 'how come 'ee a-wandering 'ere, sir? Where might 'ee be a-making for?'

'Charlbury,' was the answer.

The man whistled. 'Charlbury,' he repeated. 'Again begging pardon, sir, it's a place known for a nest of Papishes. I'd rather ha' heerd 'ee was going to Hell. And where might 'ee come from last, sir?'

The traveller checked his rising temper. 'Banbury,' he said shortly.

The keeper whistled again. ' 'Ee've fetched a mighty round-about way, sir, and the good turnpike running straight for any Christian to see. But I've heard tell of folks that fought shy of turnpikes.'

'Confound you, man,' the traveller cried; 'show me the road or I will find it myself and you'll forfeit your shilling.'

The keeper did not move. 'A shilling's no price for a man's honesty. I reckon 'ee mun come up with me to Sir Edward, sir. He says to me only this morning – '' 'Ee watch the Forest, Tom, and if 'ee finds any that can't give good account of themselves, 'ee fetch them up to me, and it'll maybe mean a golden guinea in your pocket.'' Sir Edward 'e's a Parliament man, and a Justice, and 'e's hot for King and country. There's soldiers at Islip bridge-end asking questions of all as is journeying west, and there's questions Sir Edward is going to ask of a gentleman as travels from Banbury to Charlbury by the edges of Otmoor.'

The servility had gone from the man's voice, and in its place were insolence and greed. A guinea might have placated him, but the traveller was not accustomed to bribe. A hot flush had darkened his face, and his eyes were bright.

'Get out of my way, you rogue,' he cried.

The keeper stood his ground. ' 'Ee will come to Sir Edward with me if 'ee be an honest man.'

'And if not?'

'It's my duty to constrain 'ee in the name of our Lord the King.'

The man had raised his gun, but before he could bring the barrel forward he was looking at a pistol held in a very steady hand. He was no coward, but he had little love for needless risks, when he could find a better way. He turned and ran up the steep path at a surprising pace for one of his build, and as he ran he blew shrilly on a whistle.

The traveller left alone in the dell bit his lips with vexation. He had made a pretty mess of a journey which above all things

should have been inconspicuous, and had raised a hue and cry after him on the domain of some arrogant Whig. He heard the keeper's steps and the note of his whistle grow fainter; he seemed to be crying to others and answers came back faintly. In a few minutes he would be in a brawl with lackeys. . . . In that jungle there was no way of escape for a mounted man, so he must needs stand and fight.

And then suddenly he was aware of a face in the hazels.

It was the slim boy whom his intervention had saved from a beating. The lad darted from his cover and seized the horse's bridle. Speaking no word, he made signs to the other to follow, and the traveller, glad of any port in a storm, complied. They slithered at a great pace down the steep bank to the thicket of willows, which proved to be the brink of a deep ditch. A little way along it they crossed by a ford of hurdles, where the water was not over a man's riding boots. They were now in a morass, which they threaded by a track which showed dimly among the reeds, and, as the whistling and cries were still audible behind them, they did not relax their pace. But after two more deep runnels had been passed, and a mere thick with water-lilies crossed by a chain of hard tussocks like stepping-stones, the guide seemed to consider the danger gone. He slowed down, laughing, and cocked snooks in the direction of the pursuit. Then he signed to the traveller to remount his horse, but when the latter would have questioned him, he shook his head and put a finger on his lips. He was either dumb, or a miracle of prudence.

The young man found himself in a great green fenland, but the falling night and the rain limited his view to a narrow circle. There was a constant crying of snipe and plover around him, and the noise of wild fowl rose like the croaking of frogs in the Campagna. Acres of rank pasture were threaded with lagoons where the brown water winked and bubbled above fathomless mud. The traveller sniffed the air with a sense of something foreign and menacing. The honest bitter smell of peat-bogs he loved, but the odour of this marsh was heavy and sweet and

rotten. As his horse's hooves squelched in the sodden herbage he shivered a little and glanced suspiciously at his guide. Where was this gypsy halfling leading him? It looked as if he had found an ill-boding sanctuary.

With every yard that he advanced into the dank green wilderness his oppression increased. The laden air, the mist, the clamour of wild birds, the knowledge that his horse was no advantage since a step aside would set it wallowing to the girths, all combined to make the place a prison-house, hateful to one on an urgent mission. . . . Suddenly he was above the fen on a hard causeway, where hooves made a solid echo. His spirits recovered, for he recognised Roman work, and a Roman road did not end in sloughs. On one side, below the level of the causeway, was a jungle of blackthorn and elder, and a whiff of wood-smoke reached his nostrils. The guide halted and three times gave a call like that of a nesting redshank. It was answered, and from an alley in the scrub a man appeared.

He was a roughly dressed countryman, wearing huge leathern boots muddied to the knee. Apparently the guide was not wholly dumb, for he spoke to him in an odd voice that croaked from the back of his throat, and the man nodded and bent his brows. Then he lifted his eyes and solemnly regarded the horseman for the space of some seconds.

'You be welcome, sir,' he said. 'If you can make shift with poor fare there be supper and lodging waiting for you.'

The boy made signs for him to dismount, and led off the horse, while the man beckoned him to follow into the tunnel in the scrub. In less than fifty yards he found himself in a clearing where a knuckle of gravel made a patch of hard ground. In the centre stood a small ancient obelisk, like an overgrown milestone. A big fire of logs and brushwood was burning, and round it sat half a dozen men, engaged in cooking. They turned slow eyes on the newcomer, and made room for him in their circle.

'Tom Heather's been giving trouble. He cotched Zerry and was a-basting him when this gentleman rides up. Then he turns on the gentleman, and, being feared o' him as man to man, goes

whistling for Red Tosspot and Brother Mark. So Zerry brings the gentleman into the Moor, and here he be. I tell him he's kindly welcome, and snug enough with us moor-men, though the King's soldiers was sitting in all the Seven Towns.'

'He'd be safe,' said one, 'though Lord Abingdon and his moor-drivers was prancing up at Beckley.'

There was a laugh at this, and the new-comer, cheered by the blaze and the smell of food, made suitable reply. He had not quite understood their slow burring speech, nor did they altogether follow his words, for he spoke English in the formal clipped fashion of one to whom it was an acquired tongue. But the goodwill on both sides was manifest, and food was pressed on him – wild duck roasted on stakes, hunks of brown bread, and beer out of leather jacks. The men had been fowling, for great heaps of mallard and teal and widgeon were piled beyond the fire.

The traveller ate heartily, for he had had no meal since breakfast, and as he ate, he studied his companions in the firelight. They were rough-looking fellows, dressed pretty much alike in frieze and leather, and they had the sallowish skin and yellow-tinged eyes which he remembered to have seen among dwellers in the Ravenna marshes. But they were no gipsies or outlaws, but had the assured and forthright air of men with some stake in the land. Excellent were their manners, for the presence of a stranger in no way incommoded them; they attended to his wants, and with easy good-breeding talked their own talk. Understanding little of that talk, he occupied himself in observing their faces and gestures with the interest of a traveller in a new country. These folk were at once slower and speedier than his own kind – more deliberate in speech and movement, but quicker to show emotion in their open countenances. He speculated on their merits as soldiers, for against such as these he and his friends must presently fight.

''Morrow we'd best take Mercot Fleet,' said one. 'Mas'r Midwinter reckons as the floods will be down come Sunday.'

'Right, neighbour Basson,' said another. 'He knows times and seasons better'n Parson and near as well as Almighty God.'

'What be this tale of bloody wars?' asked a third. 'The Spoonbills be out, and that means that the land is troubled. They was saying down at Noke that Long Giles was seen last week at Banbury fair and the Spayniard was travelling the Lunnon road. All dressed up he were like a fine gentleman, and at Wheatley Green Man he was snuffing out o' Squire Norreys' box.'

'Who speaks of the Spoonbills?' said the man who had first welcomed the traveller. 'We bain't no ale-house prattlers. What Mas'r Midwinter wants us to know I reckon he'll tell us open and neighbourly. Think you he'll make music the night?'

'He's had his supper the best part of an hour, and then he'll take tobacco. After that happen he'll gie us a tune.'

The speaker had looked over his shoulder, and the traveller, following his glance, became aware that close on the edge of the thicket a small tent was pitched. The night had fallen thick and moonless, but the firelight, wavering in the wind, showed it as a grey patch against the gloom of the covert. As the conversation droned on, that patch held his eyes like a magnet. There was a man there, someone with the strange name of Midwinter, someone whom these moor-men held in reverence. The young man had the appetite of his race for mysteries, and his errand had keyed him to a mood of eager inquiry. He looked at the blur which was the tent as a terrier watches a badger's earth.

The talk round the fire had grown boisterous, for someone had told a tale which woke deep rumbling laughter. Suddenly it was hushed, for the thin high note of a violin cleft the air like an arrow.

The sound was muffled by the tent-cloth, but none the less it dominated and filled that lonely place. The traveller had a receptive ear for music and had heard many varieties in his recent wanderings, from the operas of Rome and Paris to gypsy dances in wild glens of Apennine and Pyrenees. But this fiddling was a new experience, for it obeyed no law, but jigged and wailed and chuckled like a gale in an old house. It seemed to be a symphony of the noises of the moor, where unearthly birds

sang duets with winds from the back of beyond. It stirred him strangely. His own bagpipes could bring tears to his eyes with memory of things dear and familiar; but this quickened his blood, like a voice from a far world.

The group by the fire listened stolidly with their heads sunk, but the young man kept his eyes on the tent. Presently the music ceased, and from the flap a figure emerged with the fiddle in its hand. The others rose to their feet, and remained standing till the musician had taken a seat at the other side of the fire from the traveller. 'Welcome, Mas'r Midwinter,' was the general greeting, and one of them told him the story of Tom Heather and their guest.

The young man by craning his neck could see the new figure clear in the glow of the embers. He made out a short man of an immense breadth of shoulder, whose long arms must have reached well below his knees. He had a large square face, tanned to the colour of bark, and of a most surprising ugliness, for his nose was broken in the middle, and one cheek and the corner of one eye were puckered with an old scar. Chin and lips were shaven, and the wide mouth showed white regular teeth. His garments seemed to be of leather like the others, but he wore a cravat, and his hair, though unpowdered, was neatly tied.

He was looking at the traveller and, catching his eye, he bowed and smiled pleasantly.

'You have found but a rough lodging, Mr—' he said, with the lift of interrogation in his voice.

'Andrew Watson they call me. A merchant of Newcastle, sir, journeying Bristol-wards on a matter of business.' The formula, which had sounded well enough hitherto, now seemed inept, and he spoke it with less assurance.

The fiddler laughed. 'That is for change-houses. Among friends you will doubtless tell another tale. For how comes a merchant of the North country to be so far from a high road? Shall I read the riddle, sir?'

He took up his violin and played very low and sweetly a Border lilt called 'The Waukin' o' the Fauld'. The young man

listened with interest, but his face did not reveal what the musician sought. The latter tried again, this time the tune called 'Colin's Cattle', which was made by the fairies and was hummed everywhere north of Forth. Bright eyes read the young man's face. 'I touch you,' the fiddler said, 'but not closely.'

For a moment he seemed to consider, and then drew from his instrument a slow dirge, with the rain in it and the west wind and the surge of forlorn seas. It was that lament which in all the country from Mull to Moidart is the begetter of long thoughts. He played it like a master, making his fiddle weep and brood and exult in turn, and he ended with a fantastic variation so bitter with pain that the young man, hearing his ancestral melody in this foreign land, cried out in amazement.

The musician lowered his violin, smiling. 'This time,' he said, 'I touch you at the heart. Now I know you. You have nothing to fear among the moor-men of the Seven Towns. Take your ease, Alastair Maclean, among friends.'

The traveller, thus unexpectedly unveiled, could find no words for his astonishment.

'Are you of the honest party?' he stammered, more in awe than in anxiety.

'I am of no party. Ask the moor-men if the Spoonbills trouble their heads with Governments?'

The answer from the circle was a laugh.

'Who are you, then, that watches thus the comings and goings of travellers?'

'I am nothing – a will-o'-the-wisp at your service – a clod of vivified dust whom its progenitors christened Amos Midwinter. I have no possession but my name, and no calling but that of philosopher. Naked I came from the earth, and naked I will return to it.'

He plucked with a finger at the fiddle-strings, and evoked an odd lilt. Then he crooned:

'Three naked men I saw,
One to hang and one to draw,
One to feed the corbie's maw.'

The men by the fire shivered, and one spoke. 'Let be, Mas'r Midwinter. Them words makes my innards cold.'

'I will try others,' and he sang:

'Three naked men we be,
Stark aneath the blackthorn tree.
Christ ha' mercy on such as we!'

The young man found his apprehensions yielding place to a lively curiosity. From this madman, whoever he might be, he ran no risk of betrayal. The thought flashed over his mind that here was one who might further the cause he served.

'I take it you are not alone in your calling?' he said.

'There are others – few but choice. There are no secrets among us who camp by Jacob's Stone.' He pointed to the rude obelisk which was just within the glow of the fire. 'Once that was an altar where the Romans sacrificed to fierce gods and pretty goddesses. It is a thousand years and more since it felt their flame, but it has always been a trysting place. We Christian men have forsworn Apollo, but maybe he still lingers, and the savour of our little cooking fires may please him. I am one that takes no chances with the old gods. . . . Here there is safety for the honest law-breaker, and confidence for the friend, for we are reverent souls. How does it go? – *Fides et Pax et Honos Pudorque priscus*.'

'Then tell me of your brotherhood?'

The man laughed. 'That no man can know unless he be sealed of it. From the Channel to the Tyne they call us the Spoonbills, and on Cumbrian moors they know us as the Bog-blitters. But our titles are as many as the by-names of Jupiter. Up in your country I have heard that men talk of us as the Left-Handed.'

He spoke the last word in Gaelic – *ciotach* – and the young man at the sound of his own tongue almost leapt to his feet.

'Have you the speech?' he cried in the same language.

The man shook his head. 'I have nothing. For our true name is that I have sung to you. We are the Naked Men.' And he crooned again the strange catch.

For an instant Alastair felt his soul clouded by an eeriness which his bustling life had not known since as a little boy he had wandered alone into the corries of Sgurr Dubh. The moonless night was black about him, and it had fallen silent except for the sputter of logs. He seemed cut off from all things familiar by infinite miles of midnight, and in the heart of the darkness was this madman who knew all things and made a mock of knowledge. The situation so far transcended his experience that his orderly world seemed to melt into shadows. The tangible bounds of life dislimned and he looked into outer space. But the fiddler dispelled the atmosphere of awe, for he pulled out a pipe and filled and lit it.

'I can offer you better hospitality, sir, than a bed by the fire. A share of my tent is at your service. These moor-men are hardened to it, but if you press the ground this October night you will most surely get a touch of the moor-evil, and that is ill to cure save by a week's drinking of Oddington Well. So by your grace we will leave our honest friends to their talk of latimer and autumn markets.'

Accompanied by deep-voiced 'Good-nights' Alastair followed the fiddler to the tent, which proved to be larger and more pretentious than it had appeared from the fire. Midwinter lit a small lamp which he fastened to the pole, and closed the flap. The traveller's mails had been laid on the floor, and two couches had been made up of skins of fox and deer and badger heaped on dry rushes.

'You do not use tobacco?' Midwinter asked. 'Then I will administer a cordial against the marsh fever.' From a leathern case he took a silver-mounted bottle, and poured a draught into a horn cup. It was a kind of spiced brandy which Alastair had drunk in Southern France, and it ran through his blood like a mild and kindly fire, driving out the fatigue of the day but

disposing to a pleasant drowsiness. He removed his boots and coat and cravat, loosened the points of his breeches, replaced his wig with a kerchief, and flung himself gratefully on the couch.

Meantime the other had stripped almost to the buff, revealing a mighty chest furred like a pelt. Alastair noted that the underclothes which remained were of silk; he noticed, too, that the man had long fine hands at the end of his brawny arms, and that his skin, where the weather had not burned it, was as delicately white as a lady's. Midwinter finished his pipe, sitting hunched among the furs, with his eyes fixed steadily on the young man. There was a mesmerism in those eyes which postponed sleep, and drove Alastair to speak. Besides, the lilt sung by the fire still hummed in his ears.

'Who told you my name?' he asked.

'That were too long a tale. Suffice it to say that I knew of your coming, and that long before Banbury you entered the orbit of my knowledge. Nay, sir, I can tell you also your errand, and I warn you that you will fail. You are about to beat at a barred and bolted door.'

'I must think you mistaken.'

'For your youth's sake, I would that I were. Consider, sir. You come from the North to bid a great man risk his all on a wild hazard. What can you, who have all your days been an adventurer, know of the dragging weight of an ordered life and broad lands and a noble house? The rich man of old turned away sorrowful from Christ because he had great possessions! Think you that the rich man nowadays will be inclined to follow your boyish piping?'

Alastair, eager to hear more but mindful of caution, finessed.

'I had heard better reports of his Grace of Beaufort,' he said.

The brown eyes regarded him quizzically. 'I did not speak of the Duke, but of Lord Cornbury.'

The young man exclaimed. 'But I summon him in the name of loyalty and religion.'

'Gallant words. But I would remind you that loyalty and religion have many meanings, and self-interest is a skilled interpreter.'

'Our Prince has already done enough to convince even self-interest.'

'Not so. You have for a moment conquered Scotland, but you will not hold it, for it is written in nature that Highlands will never for long control Lowlands. England you have not touched and will never move. The great men have too much to lose and the plain folk are careless about the whole quarrel. They know nothing of your young Prince except that he is half foreigner and whole Papist, and has for his army a mob of breechless mountainers. You can win only by enlisting Old England, and Old England has forgotten you.'

'Let her but remain neutral, and we will beat the Hanoverian's soldiers.'

'Maybe. But to clinch victory you must persuade the grandees of this realm, and in that I think you will fail. You are Johnnie Armstrong and the King. ''To seek het water beneath cauld ice, surely it is a great follie.'' And, like Johnnie, the time will come for you to say good-night.'

'What manner of man are you, who speak like an oracle? You are gentle born?'

'I am gentle born, but I have long since forfeited my heritage. Call me Ulysses, who has seen all the world's cities and men, and has at length returned to Ithaca. I am a dweller in Old England.'

'That explains little.'

'Nay, it explains all. There is an Old England which has outlived Roman and Saxon and Dane and Norman and will outlast the Hanoverian. It has seen priest turn to presbyter and presbyter to parson and has only smiled. It is the land of the edge of moorlands and the rims of forests and the twilight before dawn, and strange knowledge still dwells in it. Lords and Parliament-men bustle about, but the dust of their coaches stops at the roadside hedges, and they do not see the quiet eyes watching them at the fords. Those eyes are their masters, young sir. I am gentle born, as you guess, and have been in my day scholar and soldier, but now my companions are the moor-men

and the purley-men and the hill-shepherds and the raggle-taggle gypsies. And I am wholly content, for my calling is philosophy. I stand aside in life, and strike no blows and make no bargain, but I learn that which is hid from others.'

Alastair stirred impatiently.

'You are not above forty,' he said. 'You have health and wits and spirit. Great God, man, have you no cause or leader to fight for? Have you no honest ambition to fulfil before you vanish into the dark?'

'None. You and I are at opposite poles of mind. You are drunken with youth and ardent to strike a blow for a dozen loves. You value life, but you will surrender it joyfully for a whimsy of honour. You travel with a huge baggage of ambitions and loyalties. For me, I make it my business to travel light, caring nothing for King or party or church. As I told you, I and my like are the Naked Men.'

Alastair's eyes were drooping.

'Have you no loyalties?' he asked sleepily.

The answer wove itself into his first dream. 'I have the loyalties of Old England.'

When Alastair awoke he found his boots cleaned from the mud of yesterday, and his coat well brushed and folded. The moor-men had gone off to their fowling, and the two were alone in the clearing, on which had closed down a dense October fog. They breakfasted off a flagon of beer and a broiled wild-duck, which Midwinter cooked on a little fire. He had resumed his coarse leather garments, and looked like some giant gnome as he squatted at his task. But daytime had taken from him the odd glamour of the past night. He now seemed only a thick-set countryman – a horse-doctor or a small yeoman.

The boy Zerry appeared with the horse, which had been skilfully groomed, and Midwinter led the young man to the Roman causeway.

'It is a clear road to Oddington,' he told him, 'where you can cross the river by the hurdle bridge. Keep the bells of Woodeaton that we call the Flageolets on your left hand – they will be

ringing for St Luke's morn. Presently you will come to the Stratford road, which will bring you to Enstone and the fringe of Wychwood forest. You will be at Cornbury long before the dinner-hour.'

When Alastair was in the saddle, the other held out his hand.

'I have a liking for you, and would fain serve you. You will not be advised by me but will go your own proud road. God prosper you, young sir. But if it so be that you should lose your fine baggage and need a helper, then I have this word for you. Find an ale-house which, whatever its sign, has an open eye painted beneath it, or a cross-roads with a tuft of broom tied to the signpost. Whistle there the catch I taught you last night, and maybe the Naked Men will come to your aid.'