Lovereading.co.uk
Helping you choose your next book

You loved your last book...but what are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

Witch Wood

Written by John Buchan

Introduction by Allan Massie

Published by Polygon

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

Introduction

The story of Major Weir is one of the most famous of Edinburgh tales. He was a soldier of the Covenant and a notably pious Calvinist. It was said that if three or four of the most extreme Presbyterians were gathered together, the Major was sure to be one of them. His power of extempore prayer filled all with admiration, even in that seventeenth century when ministers of the Kirk could call on the Almighty for an hour or more at a time. His conspicuous piety and eloquence caused him to be known as 'Angelical Thomas'. So there was consternation when, having fallen ill, he suddenly confessed to having had consort with the Devil and to other 'crimes of the most revolting nature', according to an account written by the Reverend Mr Fraser, minister of Wardlaw. Despite admitting his guilt, the Major refused to seek pardon, responding to every plea with the words 'Torment me no more, I am tormented enough already.' His confession seemed so improbable that the authorities at first refused to take him into custody, but eventually they did so, and he was tried and condemned for the sin of witchcraft. Sentenced to be burned in the Grassmarket, he refused the consolations of religion even to the end, crying out, 'Let me alone – I will not – *I* have lived as a beast, and I must die as a beast.' His sister, who confessed in like manner, was hanged. She had claimed that their mother had also been a witch.

Major Weir does not figure in Buchan's novel, which is set in Upper Tweeddale, not Edinburgh, and in 1645–6, some twenty years before the Major's confession and execution. But Buchan knew the story, and Weir's final cry is echoed in the fate that befalls the 'Heid Devil' of Woodilee last seen 'running demen-

ted on the hills, pursued by the dogs of his own terrors'. The theme of the novel is perversion, a story as grotesque and horrible as Weir's. The fanatical religiosity of seventeenth-century Scotland, with its insistence on damnation from which only the Elect were spared by God's Grace, could topple into a species of insanity, a delusion which permitted members of the Elect to persuade themselves that anything was permitted to those assured of salvation. This of course is the theme of James Hogg's masterpiece, *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, a novel to which Buchan's may be regarded as a companion piece.

Buchan was himself bred as a Calvinist, son of a Free Kirk manse, and remained a Presbyterian all his life. But he was also a humanist and a classicist; like his hero Montrose, who in *Witch Wood* represents humanist reason and moderation, he distrusted and rejected the extreme claims of the theocracy. In his biography of Montrose he condemned the extreme Covenanters:

> Their neurotic supernaturalism, which saw judgements and signs in the common incidents of life, weakened in the people the power of rational thought. If they gave manhood and liberty to Scotland, they did much to sap the first and shackle the second. Condemning natural pleasures and affections, they drew a dark pall over the old merry Scottish world, the world of the ballads and the songs, of frolics and mummings and 'blithesome bridals, and, since human nature will not be denied, drove men and women to sinister and perverted outlets.

It is an old truth. As Buchan's beloved Horace put it: 'Naturam expelle furca, tamen usque recurret' – 'You may drive nature out with a pitchfork, but she will always return'.

This is the central argument of *Witch Wood*. The novel was published in 1927, the biography of Montrose the following year and the two books belong together. Buchan was at ease in the seventeenth century, and of all his novels *Witch Wood* was the

most ambitious, the longest pondered, and, with the exception of *Sick Heart River*, written in the last months of his life, the most deeply felt.

It has never been as popular as the novels of adventure he threw off with such apparent ease, and which he described as 'shockers'. This is not surprising. Though the best of these go deeper than many of their early enthusiastic readers realised – something that Graham Greene was one of the first to remark on – *Witch Wood* is a very different and far more demanding piece of work. It has admittedly the narrative zest we associate with Buchan, and also that undercurrent of the uncanny which is to be found in novels like *The Three Hostages*, *The Dancing Floor* and, in a surprisingly macabre and sinister scene set in a French chateau, in *Mr Standfast*. It can be unnerving; when I read it first, at the age of fourteen or so, the chapter 'The Black Wood at Night' made the hairs on my neck stand on end. Buchan's evocation of the wilful surrender to the Powers of Darkness is effective because he recognises their attraction.

Yet here he makes demands on his readers as in no other novel. It is very completely set in time and place, and the political and theological questions he explores are distant from us. Certain passages are hard going for anyone ignorant of seventeenth-century Scottish history. Though some of its themes are for all time, nevertheless this is a novel that demonstrates the truth of L. P. Hartley's well known assertion: 'The Past is another country; they do things differently there.' They do indeed, and the concerns of what Christopher Harvie called 'the choric group of ministers' are remote from us.

So are the immediate political questions raised by the Civil Wars in Scotland and England. Yet Buchan's exploration of these, articulated by Montrose, has an enduring relevance. When he warns that 'if you upset the just proportion of the Law you will gain not liberty but confusion', and 'will have that anarchy which gives his chance to the spoiler, and out of anarchy will come some day a man of violence who will tyrannically make order again', and adds, 'it is the way of the

world, my friend', one remembers that Buchan was writing a few years after the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia and shortly before Hitler established the tyrannical order of the Third Reich.

Stevenson, a powerful influence on Buchan, once described himself as 'Scotch, sir, very Scotch', and *Witch Wood* is in every way a very Scotch novel. The mature Buchan owed more to Walter Scott than to Stevenson, and *Witch Wood* may be read as a tribute to the author of *Waverley*. The central figure, the young minister, David Sempill, is, like so many Scott heroes, notably Henry Morton in *The Tale of Old Mortality*, a man-in-the-middle, a moderate caught up in, but rejecting, the fanaticism of his times. He is a classical scholar and a humanist, a zealous son of the Kirk and preacher of the Gospel, but repelled by extremism and all but powerless against its perverted certainties. He is also that characteristic figure of so much nineteenth-century Scottish fiction: the young minister at odds with the leading men in his parish.

Scott by his own account was no great hand at portraying young women, and nor is Buchan. Yet in this novel his usual inability to draw a convincing heroine matters little, for he sidesteps the problem. All the other characters are realistic, creatures of recognisable flesh-and-blood. But Katrine Yester, as Janet Adam Smith, Buchan's first (and best) biographer, realised, belongs to a different world – that of the Ballads. We see her almost entirely through David's eyes, and he sees her as ethereal. She is presented to us as a rare spirit because that is what she is to him.

It is a very Scotch novel, not only in setting, theme and argument, but also in language. In the introduction to his admirable anthology of Scots poetry, *The Northern Muse*, Buchan lamented the withering of the old rural Scots tongue, which he had learned to speak as a boy visiting his Masterton relations on their Tweeddale farm. But, he observed sadly, if he attended a sheep-sale there now and spoke as he had in his boyhood, he would find only a few old men to understand him. Much of the dialogue in *Witch Wood* is in that old Scots (though, like Scott,

he has his hero and heroine, and also Montrose, speak in something close to standard, or genteel, English). The Scots of this novel is splendidly rich and racy – especially that spoken by Isobel Veitch, David's housekeeper, the other old women, and the farming folk; the chorus of ministers express themselves mostly in good Scots heavily laced with the language of the Old Testament, itself as unfamiliar to many readers today as Isobel's vernacular. The vigour and fecundity of the Scots is a delight. Nevertheless, as with the Scots of the Waverley novels, it poses problems for many now, even those who are Scots themselves, for much of the vocabulary is obsolete. It's probable that readers will find themselves turning often to the Glossary, though Scots ones at least will find that if they sound the words in their head, they will usually get the sense of a passage.

It is also a very Scotch novel in its moral seriousness. This remark requires qualification, for those who have claimed to incarnate moral seriousness in Scotland have often been the 'unco guid' mocked and satirised by Burns; hypocrites and Holy Willies who have perverted the gospel of Christ. Such are in truth the Pharisees of that gospel, the 'whited sepulchres', and they are here in strength in *Witch Wood*. David himself is a Christ-like figure, as Mark Kerr, the soldier-companion of Montrose, who emerges in the last pages of the book in the likeness of an avenging angel, tells the stunned congregation: 'A prophet came among you and you knew him not. For the sake of that witless thing that is now going four-foot among the braes you have condemned the innocent blood. He spent his strength for you and you rejected him, he yearned for you and you repelled him, he would have laid down his life for you and you scorned him. He is now beyond the reach of your ingratitude.' In their dream of being a people who have made a Covenant with God, the Kirk has worshipped the Old Testament and forgotten, even rejected, the New. Or, as Mark Kerr tells them, they have been 'muckle weans that played at being ancient Israelites'.

Critics tend to dwell on the themes of a novel, if only because they are its most discussible part. This is understandable, but it

may lead them to forget that the themes underlying the narrative are not the immediately attractive or interesting elements of any fiction. Most of us read first for the story, and Buchan, here, as elsewhere, is a master of story-telling. Stevenson called this desire 'one of the natural appetites with which any lively literature has to count. The desire for knowledge, I had almost added the desire for meat, is not more deeply seated than this demand for fit and striking incident.' Buchan satisfies that appetite like few others, in his historical novels as surely as in his 'shockers'. There is incident aplenty in *Witch Wood* – one thinks of the disturbing visit of the 'witch-pricker', of the slaughter of camp-followers fleeing from the Battle of Philiphaugh, of the vivid account of the plague, of David's last dramatic conversation with Ephraim Caird, of Mark Kerr's superbly rhetorical appearance in the Kirk. This last strikes a characteristic note of Romance: it is highly improbable, yet absolutely convincing.

Buchan at his best, as he is here, always anchors his narrative in a particular place, which he evokes with the imaginative penetration that derives from knowledge. He knew that the incidents of a novel are made credible and persuasive if the setting is fully realised. Description of place is not mere decoration, not something added on, but integral to the character and atmosphere of the novel. Indeed one may say that in *Witch Wood* the landscape – country that Buchan had known since he was a child, hills that he had tramped over, woods he had explored – is so vividly brought before us as itself to be one of the principal characters in the novel.

If David Sempill is himself almost too good to be true and Katrine is, as I have suggested, a figure from the Ballads rather than real life, all the minor characters are among the most convincing that Buchan ever drew. He rarely failed when creating country women – one thinks of the admirable Phemie Morran in *Huntingtower* – but Isobel Veitch, loyal, sly, indignant, and quick-tongued, is wonderfully true to life. The novel sparkles whenever she opens her mouth. The group of minis-

ters are subtly distinguished one from the other, and Buchan resists the temptation to make even the most objectionable of them appear as hypocrites. Mark Kerr may denounce them as such, but in truth they are sincere in their narrow interpretation of the Scriptures, while their unshakable conviction of self-righteousness is also something that is 'very Scotch'.

Indeed in his different way David Sempill is every bit as self-righteous as his adversaries. He draws his strength from the same sort of certainty, and this opens another aspect of the book. Good novels are always open to more than one interpretation, sometimes indeed, quite legitimately, to an interpretation beyond that intended by their author. So it is possible to question the indignation aroused in David by what he sees in the wood by night and to ask whether he is not perhaps in his own way as narrow-minded in his morality as those who will condemn him. For the devil-worship itself may be less awful than he supposes, more trivial and even silly, a mere excuse for sexual licence, for the release of those natural animal instincts which the severe rule of the Kirk has repressed. If legitimate joy in the body is denied, and carnality is condemned as shameful and sinful, then these instincts will seek an outlet, which may appear grotesque and repulsive as it does to David. A modern reader may well conclude that David should have made an effort to understand rather than rushing to condemn. But for Buchan to have had him doing so would have been grossly unhistorical; David may be a moderate among the ministers of the Kirk, more alert than his peers to the message of the New Testament; nevertheless he too is a Presbyterian of the seventeenth century, imbued with his creed's distrust of the flesh. Yet one may ask whether, in his final terrible dialogue with Ephraim Caird, it is not David who shows himself the neurotic. For all his genuine virtue and sweetness of character, he has not fully grasped the truth of Mark Kerr's warning that: 'The Kirk has made the yett of grace ower wide for sinful men, and all ither yetts ower narrow. It has banned innocence, and so made a calling of hypocrisy, for human nature is human nature, and if you tell a

man that honest pleasure is a sin in God's sight he finds a way to get the pleasure, and yet keep the name for godliness.'

Buchan thought *Witch Wood* the best of his novels, and, though it has never been the most popular, he was right. It goes deeper than anything else he wrote. If it is first and foremost a historical novel, exploring in the manner of Scott and the mature Stevenson, a significant moment in Scottish history, and offering a study of Scottish society, and of the ideology which dominated that society and formed the historical character of the Scottish people, it is also a book which raises questions – disturbing questions – about human nature, about our capacity for self-deception, and about the consequences of repressing certain elements of that nature. Buchan's contemporary Ford Madox Ford held that the best imaginative literature has the power, denied in his view to other art forms, to make us think and feel at the same time. *Witch Wood* – more than anything else Buchan wrote – has that power. Like all great novels it makes a strong first impression, draws you to read it a second and third time, and reveals more at each subsequent reading.

Allan Massie
July 2008

Prologue

Time, my grandfather used to say, stood still in that glen of his. But the truth of the saying did not survive his death, and the first daisies had scarcely withered on his grave before a new world was knocking at the gate. That was thirty years ago, and today the revolution is complete. The parish name has been changed; the white box of a kirk which served the glen for more than two centuries has been rebuilt in red suburban gothic; a main railway line now runs down the Aller and the excellent summer service brings holiday-makers from a hundred miles distant: houses and shops have clustered under the Hill of Deer; there may be found a well-reputed boarding school for youth, two inns – both of them reformed – a garage, and a bank agent. The centre of importance has moved from the old village to the new town by the station, and even the old village is no more a clachan of thatched roofs straggling by a burnside. Some enemy of the human race has taught the burn to run straight like a sewer and has spanned it with a concrete bridge, while the thatch of the houses has been replaced by slates of a metallic green. Only the ruins of the old kirkton have not been meddled with; these stand as I remember them, knee-deep in docks and nettles, defended by a crumbling dry-stone dyke against inquisitive cattle from Crossbasket.

The old folk are gone, too, and their very names are passing from the countryside. Long before my day the Hawkshaws had disappeared from Calidon, but there was a respectable Edinburgh burgess family who had come there in the seventeenth century; now these have given place to a rawer burgess graft from the West. The farmers are mostly new men, and even the

peasant, who should be the enduring stock, has shifted his slow bones. I learned from the postman that in Woodilee today there was no Monfries, no Sprot, but one Pennecuik, and only two bearers of the names of Ritchie and Shillinglaw, which had once been plentiful as ragwort. In such a renovated world it was idle to hope to find surviving the tales which had perplexed my childhood. No one could tell me when or why the kirk by the Crossbasket march became a ruin, and its gravestones lay buried in weeds. Most did not even know that it had been a kirk.

I was not greatly surprised at this, for the kirk of Woodilee had not been used for the better part of three centuries; and even as a child I could not find many to tell me of its last minister. The thing had sunk from a tale to an 'owercome,' a form of words which everyone knew but which few could interpret. It was Jess Blane, the grieve's daughter, who first stirred my curiosity. In a whirl of wrath at some of my doings she prayed that the fate of the minister of Woodilee might be mine – a fate which she expounded as to be 'claught by the Deil and awa' wi''. A little scared, I carried the affair to my nurse, who was gravely scandalised, and denounced Jess as a 'shamefu' tawpie, fyling the wean's mind wi' her black lees'. 'Dinna you be feared, dearie,' she reassured me. 'It wasna the Deil that cam for the Minister o' Woodilee. I've aye heard tell that he was a guid man and a kind man. It was the Fairies, hinny. And he leev'd happy wi' them and dee'd happy and never drank out o' an empty cup.' I took my information, I remember, to the clan of children who were my playmates, and they spread it among their households and came back with confirmation or contradiction. Some held for the Devil, some for the Fairies – a proof that tradition spoke with two voices. The Fairy school slightly outnumbered the others, and in a battle one April evening close to the ruined kirk we routed the diabolists and established our version as the canon. But save for the solitary fact – that the Minister of Woodilee had gone off with the Fairies – the canon remained bare.

Years later I got the tale out of many books and places; a folio in the library of a Dutch college, the muniment-room of a Catholic family in Lancashire, notes in a copy of the second

Latin edition of Wishart's *Montrose*, the diaries of a captain of Hebron's and of a London glove-maker, the exercise book of a seventeenth-century Welsh schoolgirl. I could piece the story together well enough, but at first I found it hard to fit it to the Woodilee that I knew – that decorous landscape, prim, determinate, without a hint of mystery; the bare hill-tops, bleak at seasons, but commonly of a friendly Pickwickian baldness, skirted with methodically-planned woods of selected conifers, and girdled with mathematical stone dykes; the even, ruled fields of the valley bottom; the studied moderation of the burns in a land meticulously drained; the dapper glass and stone and metal of the village. Two miles off, it was true, ran the noble untamed streams of Aller; beyond them the hills rose in dark fields to mid-sky, with the glen of the Rood making a sword-cut into their heart. But Woodilee itself – whither had fled the saviour? Once, I knew from the books, the great wood of Melanudrigill had descended from the heights and flowed in black waves to the village brink. But I could not re-create the picture out of glistening asphalted highway, singing telegraph wires, spruce dwellings, model pastures, and manicured woodlands.

Then one evening from the Hill of Deer I saw with other eyes. There was a curious leaden sky, with a blue break about sunset, so that the shadows lay oddly. My first thought, as I looked at the familiar scene, was that, had I been a general in a campaign, I should have taken special note of Woodilee, for it was a point of vantage. It lay right in the pass between the Scottish midlands and the south – the pass of road and water – yes, and – shall I say? – of spirit, for it was in the throat of the hills, on the march between the sown and the desert. I was looking east, and to my left and behind me the open downs, farmed to their last decimal of capacity, were the ancient land of Manann, the capital province of Pictdom. The colliery headgear on the horizon, the trivial moorish hill-tops, the dambrod-pattern fields, could never tame wholly for me that land's romance, and on this evening I seemed to be gazing at a thing antique and wolfish, tricked out for the moment with a sheep's coat. . . . To my right

rose the huddle of great hills which cradle all our rivers. To them time and weather bring little change, yet in that eery light, which revealed in hard outline while it obscured in detail, they seemed too remote and awful to be the kindly giants with whose glens I daily conversed. . . . At my feet lay Woodilee, and a miracle had been wrought, for a gloom like the shadow of an eclipse seemed to have crept over the parish. I saw an illusion, which I knew to be such, but which my mind accepted, for it gave me the vision I had been seeking.

It was the Woodilee of three hundred years ago. And my mind, once given the cue, set out things not presented by the illuded eye. . . . There were no highways – only tracks, miry in the bogs and stony on the braes, which led to Edinburgh on one hand and to Carlisle on the other. I saw few houses, and these were brown as peat, but on the knowe of the old kirkton I saw the four grey walls of the kirk, and the manse beside it among elders and young ashes. Woodilee was not now a parish lying open to the eye of sun and wind. It was no more than a tiny jumble of crofts, bounded and pressed in upon by something vast and dark, which clothed the tops of all but the highest hills, muffled the ridges, choked the glens and overflowed almost to the edge of the waters – which lay on the landscape like a shaggy fur cast loosely down. My mouth shaped the word 'Melanudrigill', and I knew that I saw Woodilee as no eye had seen it for three centuries, when, as its name tells, it still lay in the shadow of a remnant of the Wood of Caledon, that most ancient forest where once Merlin harped and Arthur mustered his men. . . .

An engine whistled in the valley, a signal-box sprang into light, and my vision passed. But as I picked my way down the hillside in the growing dusk I realised that all memory of the encircling forest had not gone from Woodilee in my childhood, though the name of Melanudrigill had been forgotten. I could hear old Jock Dodds, who had been keeper on Calidon for fifty years, telling tales for my delectation, as he sat and smoked on the big stone beside the smithy. He would speak of his father, and his father's father, and the latter had been a great hero with

his flint-lock gun. 'He would lie in the moss or three on the winter mornin's, and him an auld man, and get the wild swans and the grey geese when they cam ower frae Clyde to Aller. Ay, and mony's the deer he would kill.' And when I pointed out that there were no deer in the countryside, Jock shook his head and said that in his grandfather's day the Black Wood was not all destroyed. 'There was a muckle lump on Windyways, and anither this side o' Reiverslaw.' But if I asked for more about the wood, Jock was vague. Some said it had been first set by the Romans, others by Auld Michael Scott himself. . . . 'A grand hidy-hole for beasts and an unco bit for warlocks.' . . . Its downfall had begun long ago in the Dear Years, and the last of it had been burnt for firewood in his father's day, in the winter of the Sixteen Drifty Days. . . .

I remembered, too, that there had been places still sacrosanct and feared. To Mary Cross, a shapeless stone in a field of bracken, no one would go in the spring or summer gloaming, but the girls decked it with wild flowers at high noon of Midsummer Day. There was a stretch of Woodilee burn, between the village and the now-drained Fennan Moss, where trout, it was believed, were never found. Above all, right in the heart of Reiverslaw's best field of turnips was a spring, which we children knew as Katie Thirsty, but which the old folk called the Minister's Well, and mentioned always with a shake of the head or a sigh, for it was there, they said, that the Minister of Woodilee had left the earth for Fairyland.

ONE

The Coming of the Minister

The Reverend David Sempill began his ministry in Woodilee on the twenty-sixth day of August in the year of grace sixteen hundred and forty-four. He was no stranger to the glen, for as a boy he had spent his holidays with his grandfather, who was the miller of Roodfoot. In that year when the horn of the Kirk was exalted the voice of a patron mattered less; Mr Sempill had been, as they said, 'popularly called', and so entered upon his office with the eager interest of the parish which had chosen him. A year before he had been licensed by the presbytery of Edinburgh; he was ordained in Woodilee in the present year on the last Sabbath of June, and 'preached in' on the third Sabbath of August by the weighty voice of Mungo Muirhead, the minister of Kirk Aller. His plenishing – chiefly books – had come from Edinburgh on eight pack-horses, and, having escaped the perils of Carnwath Moss, was now set out in an upper chamber of the little damp manse, which stood between the kirk and Woodilee burn. A decent widow woman, Isobel Veitch by name, had been found to keep his house, and David himself, now that all was ready, had ridden over on his grey cob from his cousin's at Newbiggin and taken seisin of his new home. He had sung as he came in sight of Woodilee; he had prayed with bowed head as he crossed the manse threshold; but as he sat in the closet which he named his 'study', and saw his precious books on the shelf and the table before him on which great works would be written, and outside the half-glazed window the gooseberry bushes of the garden and the silver links of the burn, he had almost wept with pure gratitude and content.

His first hour he had spent exploring his property. The manse was little and squat and gave lodging in its heather-

thatched roof to more than one colony of bees. The front abutted on the kirkton road, save for a narrow strip of green edged with smooth white stones from the burn. The back looked on a garden, where stood a score of apple trees, the small wild fruit of which was scarcely worth the gathering. There was also a square of green for bleaching clothes, a gean tree, a plot of gillyflowers and monkshood, and another of precious herbs like clary, penny-royal, and marjoram. At one end of the manse stood a brewhouse and a granary or girnel, for the storing of the minister's stipend meal; at the other a stable for two beasts, a byre with three stalls, a hen-house of mud, and, in the angle of the dykes of the kirk loan, a midden among nettles.

Indoors the place was not commodious, and even on that warm August day a chill struck upward from the earthen floors. The low-ceiled lobby had no light but the open door. To the right of it was the living-room with a boarded ceiling, a wooden floor, and roughly plastered walls, where the minister's eight-day clock (by John Atchison, Leith, 1601) had now acclimatised itself. To the left lay Isobel's kitchen, with a door leading to the brew-house, and Isobel's press-bed at the back of it, and a small dog-hole of a cellar. The upper story was reached by a wooden staircase as steep as a ladder, which opened direct into the minister's bedroom – an apartment of luxury, for it had a fireplace. One door led from it to the solitary guest-chamber; another to a tiny hearthless room, which was his study or closet, and which at the moment ranked in his mind as the most miraculous of his possessions.

David ranged around like a boy back from school, and indeed with his thick sandy hair and ruddy countenance and slim straight back he seemed scarcely to have outgrown the school-boy. He spilt the browst in the brewhouse and made a spectacle of himself with pease-meal in the girnel. Isobel watched him anxiously out of doors, when he sampled the fruit of the apple trees, and with various rejected specimens took shots at a starling in the glebe. Then in response to his shouts she brought him a basin of water and he washed off the dust of his morning

ride. The August sun fell warm on the little yard; the sound of the burn in the glen, the clack of the kirkton smithy, the sheep far off on Windyways, the bees in the clove gillyflowers, all melted into the soothing hum of a moorland noontide. The minister smiled as he scrubbed his cheeks, and Isobel's little old puckered apple-hued face smiled back. 'Ay, sir,' she said, 'our lines is fallen intil a goodly place and a pleasant habitation. The Lord be thankit.' And as he cried a fervent amen and tossed the towel back to her, a stir at the front door betokened his first visitors.

These were no less than three in number, neighbouring ministers who had ridden over on their garrons to bid the young man welcome to Woodilee. Presently stable and byre were crowded with their beasts, and the three brethren had bestowed themselves on the rough bench which adjoined the bleaching ground. They would have their dinner at the village ordinary – let not Mr Sempill put himself about – they would never have come thus unannounced if they had thought that they would be pressed to a meal. But they allowed themselves to be persuaded by the hospitable clamour of Isobel, who saw in such a function on her first day at the manse a social aggrandisement. 'Mr Sempill would think black burnin' shame if the gentlemen didna break breid. . . . There was walth o' provender in the house – this moment she had put a hen in the pot – she had a brace of muirfowl ready for brandering that had been sent from Chasehope that very morn. . . .' The three smiled tolerantly and hopefully. 'Ye've gotten a rare Abigail, Mr Sempill. A woman o' mense and sense – the manse o' Woodilee will be well guidit.'

The Reverend Mungo Muirhead had a vast shaven face set atop of a thick neck and a cumbrous body. He had a big thin-lipped mouth which shut tight like a lawyer's, a fleshy nose, and large grey eyes which at most times were ruminant as a cow's, but could on occasion kindle to shrewdness. His complexion was pale, and he was fast growing bald, so the impression at first sight was of a perfect mountain of countenance, a steep field of colourless skin. As minister of Kirk Aller he was the metropo-

litan of the company, and as became a townsman he wore decent black with bands, and boasted a hat. The Reverend Ebenezer Proudfoot from the moorland village of Bold was of a different cast. He wore the coarse grey homespun of the farmer, his head-covering was a blue bonnet, his shoes were thick brogues with leather ties, and he had donned a pair of ancient frieze leggings. A massive sinewy figure, there was in his narrow face and small blue eyes an air of rude power and fiery energy. The third, Mr James Fordyce from the neighbouring parish of Cauldshaw, was slight and thin, and pale either from ill-health or from much study. He was dressed in worn blue, and even in the August sun kept his plaid round his shoulders. In his face a fine brow was marred by the contraction of his lean jaws and a mouth puckered constantly as if in doubt or pain, but redeemed by brown eyes, as soft and wistful as a girl's.

At the hour of noon they sat down to meat. Mr Muirhead said a lengthy grace, which, since he sniffed the savour from the kitchen, he began appropriately with 'Bountiful Jehovah'. All the dishes were set out at once on the bare deal table – a bowl of barley kail, a boiled fowl, the two brandered grouse, and a platter of oatcakes. The merchant in the Pleasance of Edinburgh had given his son a better plenishing than fell to the usual lot of ministers, for there were pewter plates and a knife and a fork for each guest. The three stared at the splendour, and Mr Proudfoot, as if to testify against luxury, preferred to pick the bones with his hands. The homebrewed ale was good, and all except Mr Fordyce did full justice to it, so that the single tankard, passed from hand to hand, was often refilled by Isobel. 'Man, Mr David,' cried Mr Muirhead in high good-humour, 'this is a great differ from the days of your predecessor. Worthy Mr Macmichael had never muckle but bannocks to set before his friends. But you've made us a feast of fat things.'

David inquired about his predecessor, whom he remembered dimly from his boyhood as a man even then very old, who ambled about the parish on a white shelty.

'He was a pious and diligent minister,' said Mr Muirhead, 'but since ever I kenned him he was sore fallen in the vale of years. He would stick to the same "ordinary" till he had thrashed it into stour. I've heard that he preached for a year and sax months on Exodus fifteen and twenty-seven, the twelve wells of water and three score and ten palm trees of Elim, a Sabbath to ilka well and ilka tree. I've a notion that he was never very strong in the intellectuals.'

'He wrestled mightily in prayer,' said Mr Proudfoot, 'and he was great at fencing the Tables. Ay, sirs, he was a trumpet for the pure Gospel blast.'

'I doubt not he was a good man,' said Mr Fordyce, 'and is now gone to his reward. But he was ower auld and feeble for a sinful countryside. I fear that the parish was but ill guided, and, as ye ken, there was whiles talk of a Presbytery visitation.'

'I differ!' cried Mr Muirhead. 'I differ *in toto*. Woodilee has aye been famous for its godly elders. Has it not Ephraim Caird, who was a member of Assembly and had a hand in that precious work of grace done in the East Kirk of St. Giles's two years syne? Has it not Peter Pennecuik, who has a gift of supplication like Mr Rutherford himself? Ay, and in the Bishops' War you'll mind how Amos Ritchie was staunch to uphold the Covenant with the auld matchlock that had been his gudesire's. There's no lack of true religion in Woodilee.'

'There's no lack of carnal pride, Mr Mungo. The folk of Woodilee are ready enough for any stramash in kirk or state. But what of their perishing souls, I ask? Are they striving to get a grip of Christ, as a bird scrapes with its claws at a stone wall? And do they bring forth works meet for repentance?'

'There was no clash of cauld morality in worthy Mr Macmichael,' said Mr Proudfoot sourly.

'Is there the spirit of God in the people? That's what I want to ken. There's ill stories in the countryside anent Woodilee. The Black Wood could tell some tales if the trees could talk.'

Mr Muirhead, having finished his meal and said a second grace, was picking his teeth in great good-humour.

'Hoot toots, Mr James, you'll give our young brother a scunner of the place, to which it has pleased the Almighty to call him, before he has had a look at it himself. I'm not denying that the Wood is ower near Woodilee. It's a wanchancy thing for any parochine to have a muckle black forest flung around it like a maud. And no doubt the Devil walks about like a roaring lion in Woodilee as in other bits. But there's men of God here to resist him. I tell you, sirs, there have been more delations to the Presbytery for the sin of witchcraft in Woodilee than in any other parish on the water of Aller.'

'And what does that prove, Mr Mungo?'

'That there's wealth of prayerful and eident folk to confound the Adversary. This is no season to despair of Kirk and Covenant, when this day they hold the crown of the causeway. You'll no have heard of the astonishing mercy vouchsafed to us in England? A post came to Kirk Aller yestreen, and it seems that three weeks syne there was a great battle beside the city of York, where our Scots wrought mightily, and our own Davie Leslie gave the King's horsemen their kail through the reek. What does that portend?'

'It portends,' said Mr Proudfoot, whom food did not mellow, 'that our pure and reformed Kirk of Scotland is linked more than ever with sectaries and antinomians and those, like the bloody and deceitful Cromwell, that would defile the milk of the Word with the sour whey of their human inventions. What avails a triumphant Kirk if its doctrine be sullied?'

Mr Muirhead laughed. 'It portends nothing of the kind. The good work goes cannily on, and the noble task to which the Assembly of Divines at Westminster set itself is advanced by a long mile. Man, Eben, you folk at Bold live ower far from the world. It's the Kirk of Scotland that holds the balance today and can enforce its will on both King and sectaries. Two days back I had a letter from that gospel-loving nobleman, the Earl of Loudoun. . . .'

Mr Muirhead was mounted on his high horse. He lit his pipe and for the space of half an hour dealt comprehensively with

politics, labouring to show the happy posture of affairs for what he called the 'good cause.' The Solemn League and Covenant bound all Scotland in a pact with the Lord, and presently all England would follow suit. There would be soon that comfortable sight which had been foretold by their godly fathers, a uniform Kirk and a pure Gospel established by law from London to the Orkneys, and a covenanted Sion to which all the peoples of the earth would go up. Mr Muirhead was eloquent, for he repeated a peroration which he had once used in the General Assembly.

'I have heard,' he concluded, 'that in Woodilee there was a signing of the Covenant by every soul that could make a scart with a pen. That for your encouragement, Mr David.'

Mr Fordyce shook his head. 'How many appended their names out of fear or from mere carnal policy? Mankind will run like jukes after a leader. I much misdoubt if there is any spiritual health to be got from following a multitude under duress. I would have left the choice to every man's conscience.'

'You're not sound,' cried Mr Muirhead. 'You're shaky on the fundamentals, Mr. James. I will confound you out of the Word. When King Josiah made a solemn covenant, did he leave it to ilka man's fancy to sign or no? Nay, he caused all – all, I say – in Jerusalem and Benjamin to stand to it. See Second Chronicles thirty-four and thirty-two.'

There was a touch of asperity in the one disputant and of recalcitrance in the other, so David for good-fellowship's sake suggested that he might show them the manse in its new guise. But at that moment Isobel appeared with word that Chasehope was at the door seeking speech with the minister of Kirk Aller. At her back appeared the fiery head of the visitor, who was that Ephraim Caird whom Mr Muirhead had already praised as a pillar of the Covenant and who farmed the biggest tack in the parish. He was a big fellow, red as a fox, with a white freckled face, no eyebrows and greenish blue eyes, a man of over forty, whose muscular frame was now somewhat overlaid by flesh. His mouth was small and generally puckered together, a habit

which gave him an air of thought and gravity. He had been an opponent of David Sempill before the call, but had acquiesced in the majority vote and had welcomed the new minister at the 'preaching in' with a great show of goodwill. Today he was apologetic and affable. He asked pardon for his intrusion – he would take neither bite nor sup – he had heard that the ministers were at the manse and he begged a word with Mr Muirhead on Presbytery matters which would save him a journey to Kirk Aller, when he was busy with the bog hay. So David took the other two to his closet and left Chasehope and Mr Muirhead to their colloquy.

Mr Proudfoot eyed with disapproval the books in the little dark chamber. He was content, he said, with the Bible and the Institutes of John Calvin and old Robert Rollock's commentary on the Prophet Daniel. He read the lettering on one volume, *Sancti Clementi Opera*, and on another, a work by a Dutch theologian, *De Sancti Pauli Epistolis*. The word 'Saint' roused his ire. 'Rags of Popery,' he muttered, as he banged the books back on their shelves. 'What for "Saint" Paul and not "Saint" Moses or "Saint" Isaiah? It's a queer thing that Antichrist should set himself to miscall the godly Apostles of the New Testament and let the auld prophets alone. You're a young man, Mr Sempill, and, as is natural in youth, with but a small experience of religion. Take the advice of an older man, and no clog yourself on the road to Heaven with ower much printit lear, when ye can put the whole Word of God in your pouch.'

But Mr Fordyce looked at the shelves with greedy eyes. The moor-fowl at dinner had loosened a tooth, and now it came out in his hand and was wrapped carefully in his kerchief. 'I have kept ilka tooth I have ever cast,' he told the others, 'and they will go into my coffin with me that my bodily parts may be together at the Resurrection.' 'Would you shorten the arm of the Lord?' Mr Proudfoot had asked testily. 'Can He no gather your remnants from the uttermost parts of the earth?' 'True, true,' the other had answered gently, 'but it's just my fancy to keep all my dust in the one place.' This ceremony over, he flung himself

on the books like a hungry man on food. He opened them lovingly, read their titles, fingered them as if he could scarcely bear to part with them. 'You're no half my age,' he told the owner, 'but you've twice as many books as there are in the Cauldshaw manse. You start well provided, Mr David.'

The theology he knew already and approved of, but there were other works over which he shook a moralising head. 'You've a hantle of Pagan writers, Mr David. I would counsel a young minister to apply himself rather to the Hebrew than to the Greek, for though the Greek was the tongue of the New Testament, it was also the tongue of lascivious poets and mocking philosophers, whereas the Hebrew was consecrate wholly to God. . . . But you have the Hebrew too, I see. Losh, here's the lexicon of Bamburgius, of which I have read but have never seen. We must consult, Mr David. I've a new theory of the Hebrew accents on which I would like your judgment.'

As he ran over the list he suddenly cried aloud with pleasure, and then checked himself almost shamefacedly. 'Preserve us, but here's Hieronymus Cardanus, and other astrologic works. Man, I've diverted myself whiles with the science of the stars, and can make a shape at calculating a nativity. I cannot see why the thing should not be turned to holy uses, as when the star guided the Wise Men of the East to Bethlehem. You and me must have long cracks some day. These books will be like the Pole Star to draw me to Woodilee, and I'm looking to see you soon at Cauldshaw. It's but a poor desert bit, but there have been precious occasions there and many an outpouring of grace. I'm sore troubled with the gravel, Mr David, and the goodwife has had a flux in the legs this twelvemonth back, but the Lord has showed me singular favour and my damps are lightened since a leech in Edinburgh prescribed a hyperion of bourtree and rue. . . . We're a childless household, for we had but the one bairn and sax year syne the Lord gathered her to Himself.'

Downstairs Mr Muirhead had finished his talk and the three ministers took their leave – they of Bold and Cauldshaw to jog the moorland miles to their homes, he of Kirk Aller to take his

'four-hours' with Chasehope at Lucky Weir's in the clachan. Each of the three kissed David on the cheek and blessed him after his fashion. 'May you live to be a pillar of the Kirk,' said Mr Muirhead. 'Keep a Gospel walk,' said Mr Proudfoot, 'on the narrow rigging of the truth.' But Mr Fordyce took the young man's hand, after saluting him and held it with a kind of wistful affection. 'I pray,' he said, 'that your windows may be ever open towards Jerusalem.'

When his guests had gone David Sempill explored once more his little domain, like a child who counts his treasures. Then, as the afternoon mellowed into evening, the slopes of the Hill of Deer, red with flowering heather, drew him for a walk. He wanted a wide prospect, to see his parish in its setting of hill and glen, and recall the landmarks now blurred in his childhood's memory. His black coat and breeches were of Edinburgh make and too fine for moorland work, but he had stout country shoes and hose of ram's wool, the gift of his cousin's wife at Newbiggin, and he moved over the bent with the long stride of a shepherd. He crossed the burn of Mire, and saw below him the farm-town of Mirehope, with barley and nettles at strife in the infield, and the run-rigs of the outfield feathered with very green oats. Presently he was on the Hill of Deer, where the long stacks of peats were drying so well that every breath of air sent up from them a fine flurry of dust. The Mirehope cattle, wretched little black beasts, were grazing under the charge of a herd-boy, and the Mirehope sheep, their coats matted with tar till they looked like monstrous slugs, were picking up an uneasy livelihood among the heather bushes, leaving tufts of smelly wool behind them on the scraggy twigs which were still charred from the March moorburn. He reached the low summit, and flung himself down on a patch of thymy turf between the whinstone screes, with his face to the valley.

His holiday mood still held. The visit of his ministerial brethren had not dashed him, for he saw their prosiness through a golden haze. Mr Muirhead was a stout warder on

the walls of Sion, Mr Proudfoot a guardian of the purity of the Temple, and Mr Fordyce beyond question a saint, with his haggard face and his wistful eyes. It was Mr Fordyce who stuck in his memory. A lovable saint, with his cast teeth saved up to make easy the business of a bodily resurrection, his love of the stars, his pathetic bookishness. David was full of the zest of his calling but for himself he was ready to circumscribe its duties. Not for him to uphold the Kirk against its ill-wishers in the State; in that cause he would do battle when the need arose, but not till then. He left to others the task of keeping the canon of truth pure from alloy: he accepted the Kirk's doctrine loyally, but let others do the dogmatising. The work for which he longed was to save and comfort human souls.

Seen on that hilltop the minister of Woodilee was a different figure from that beheld by his colleagues in the dim light of the manse. His active form, his colour, his tumbled hair, spoke of the boy, but his face was not boyish. In its young contours there were already thought and resolution and spiritual fineness, and there was a steady ardour in the eyes. If his chin was the fighter's, his mouth was the comforter's. Five years before he had been set on a scholar's life. At the college he had been a noted Grecian, and in Robert Bryson's bookshop at the Sign of the Prophet Jonah in the West Bow his verses, Latin and English, had been praised by the learned. When religion called him it was as a challenge not to renounce but to perfect his past. A happy preoccupation with his dream made him blind to the harshness and jealousies which beset the Kirk, and he saw only its shining mission. The beauty which is to be found in letters seemed in very truth a part of that profounder beauty which embraced all earth and Heaven in the revelation of God. He had not ceased to be the humanist in becoming the evangelist. Some had looked askance at him as too full of carnal learning for the sacred office, some as too cheerful for a shepherd of souls in a perishing world. But his critics as yet were few, for David carried with him a light and warmth which it was hard for the

sourest to resist. 'He is a gracious youth,' an old minister had said at his ordination. 'May the Lord deal tenderly with him!'

David's eyes from his perch on the hilltop rested first on the kirkton of Woodilee. He saw the manse among its trees, and the church with its thatched roof – the roof had been lead till Morton the Regent stripped it and melted it down for bullets. He saw the little beehive cottages in the clachan with the taller gable-end of Lucky Weir's ale-house. He saw the adjoining farm-towns – the Mains, Chasehope, Nether Windyways, Cross-basket, the two Fennans, each with its patches of crops lifted well above the bogs of the glen. He saw the mill of Woodilee at present idle by the burn, and hay being cut on the side of Windyways hill, and what looked like the clipping of the miller's sheep. In the bright evening the scene was all of peace and pastoral and David's heart kindled. There dwelled his people, the little flock whom God had appointed him to feed. His heart yearned over them, and in a sudden glow of tenderness he felt that this sunset prospect of his parish was a new and more solemn ordination.

It was long before he lifted his eyes beyond the glen to the great encircling amphitheatre of the hills. At first he gazed at them in an abstraction, till childish memories came back to him and he began to name the summits to himself one by one. There was the bald top of the Lammerlaw, and the peak of the Green Dod, and far beyond the long line of the great Herstane Craig, which in that childhood had been the synonym for untravelled mystery. He saw the green cleft in the hills where the Aller came down from its distant wells, and the darker glen of the Rood where bent was exchanged for rock and heather. He saw the very patches of meadow by Roodside which he had made his boyish playground. Such a hilltop prospect he had never before known, for a child lives in a magnified world, and finds immensity in short vistas. One thing struck hard on his mind. Never before had he realised the extent of the forest ground. He remembered travelling to Roodfoot through trees, and all up the water of Rood there had been a drift of scrub. But it was the

meadows and the open spaces that had been his kingdom, and his recollection was of a bare sunny land where whaup and peewit cried and the burns fell headlong from windy moors. But now, as he gazed, he realised that the countryside was mainly forest.

Everywhere, muffling the lower glen of the Woodilee burn and the immediate vale of the Aller, and climbing far up the hillside, was the gloom of trees. In the Rood glen there was darkness only at the foot, for higher up the woods thinned into scrub of oak and hazel, with the knees of the uplands showing through it. The sight powerfully impressed his fancy. Woodilee was a mere clearing in a forest. This was the *Silva Caledonis* of which old writers spoke, the wood which once covered all the land and in whose glades King Arthur had dwelt. He remembered doggerel Latin of Merlin the Bard and strange sayings of True Thomas – old wives' tales which concerned this sanctuary. He had grown up beside it and had not known of it, and now he had come back to a revelation. *Silva Caledonis!* Up the Rood water lay the house of Calidon. Were the names perhaps the same?

The young man's fancy was quick to kindle, and he looked with new eyes at the great cup of green, broken only at one spot by Aller side with the flash of water. At first in the soft evening light it had worn a gracious and homely air, even the darkness of the pines seemed luminous, and the feathery top of a patch of birches was like the smoke of household fires. . . . But as the sun sank behind the Rood hills a change seemed to come over the scene. The shade became gloom, a hostile impenetrable darkness. The birches were still like smoke, but a turbid smoke from some unhallowed altar. The distant shallows of Aller caught a ray of the dying sun and turned to blood. . . . The minister shivered and then laughed at himself for his folly.

The evening deepened in the hollows, though the hilltops were still faintly bright. The great wood seemed now to be a moving thing, a flood which lapped and surged and might at any

moment overflow the sandspit which was Woodilee. Again the minister laughed at himself, but without conviction. It must be an eery life under the shadow of that ancient formless thing. Woodilee could not be quite as other parishes, or its folk like other folk. The Wood, this hoary Wood of Caledon, must dominate their thoughts and form their characters. . . . Had not someone called it the Black Wood? – Yes, they had spoken of it that afternoon. Mr Muirhead had admitted that it must be queer to live so near it, and Mr Fordyce had shaken his head solemnly and hinted at tales that could be told if the trees would speak. . . . Did the Devil use the place as a stronghold and seduce the foolish into its shadows? Could it be said of a lost soul, *Itur in antiquam silvam?*

David was less superstitious than most men, but he had too ready a fancy and a mind too well stored with learning to be easy at the thought. Already he felt that he had found an antagonist. Was Woodilee to prove a frontier-post for God's servant against the horrid mysteries of heathendom? . . . He gave a sudden start, for a voice had sounded behind him.

The voice was singing – a charm against bogles which he remembered himself using as a child:

> Wearie, Ovie, gang awa,
> Haste ye furth o' house an' ha',
> Ower the muir and down the burn
> Wearie, Ovie, ne'er return.

A grotesque figure emerged from the dusk. It was a tall fellow, who seemed to have been broken in the middle, for he walked almost doubled up. His face, seen in the half-light, was that of a man of thirty or so, with a full black beard and red protuberant lips. His clothes were ruinous, an old leather jerkin which gaped at every seam, ragged small-clothes of frieze, and for hosen a wrapping of dirty clouts. There were no shoes on his feet, and his unwashed face was dark as a berry. In his hand he had a long ash pole, and on his head a blue cowl so tight that it was almost a skull-cap.

David recognised the figure for Daft Gibbie, the village natural, who had greeted him with mewing and shouting at his ordination. In the clachan street he had seemed an ordinary deformed idiot – what was known locally as an 'object' – but up on this twilight hilltop he was like an uncouth *revenant* from an older world. The minister instinctively gripped his staff tighter, but Gibbie's intention was of the friendliest.

'A braw guid e'en to ye, Mr Sempill, sir. I saw ye tak' the hill and I bode to follow, for I was wantin' to bid ye welcome to Woodilee. Man, ye gang up the brae-face like a maukin. Ower fast, I says to mysel', ower fast for a man o' God, for what saith the Word, ''He that believeth shall not make haste!'' '

The creature spoke in a voice of great beauty and softness – the voice rather of a woman than of a man. And as he spoke he bowed, and patted the minister's arm, and peered into his face with bright wild eyes. Then he clutched David and forced him round till again he was looking over the Wood.

'The Hill o' Deer's a grand bit for a prospect, sir, for is it no like the Hill o'Pisgah from which ye can spy the Promised Land? Ye can lift up your eyes to the hills, and ye can feast them on the bonny haughs o' the Aller, or on the douce wee clachan o'Woodilee, wi' the cots sittin' as canty round the kirk as kittlins round an auld cat.'

'I was looking at the Wood,' said David.

The man laughed shrilly. 'And a braw sicht it is in the gloamin' frae the Hill o' Deer. For ye can see the size o' the muckle spider's wab, but doun in the glen ye're that clamjamphried wi' michty trees that your heid spins like a peery and your e'en are dozened. It's a unco thing the Wud, Mr Sempill, sir?'

'Do you know your ways in it, Gibbie?'

'Me! I daurna enter it. I keep the road, for I'm feared o' yon dark howes.' Then he laughed again, and put his mouth close to the minister's ear. 'Not but what I'll tak' the Wud at the proper season. Tak' the Wud, Mr Sempill, like other folk in Woodilee.'

He peered in the minister's face to see if he were understood. Satisfied that he was not, he laughed again.

'Tak' Gibbie's advice, sir, and no gang near the Wud. It's nae place for men o' God, like yoursel', sir, and puir Gibbie.'

'Do they call it the Black Wood?'

Gibbie spat. 'Incomin' bodies, nae doot,' he said in contempt. 'But ken ye the name that auld folk gie'd it?' He became confidential again. 'They ca'd it Melanudrigill,' he whispered.

David repeated the word. His mind had been running on heathen learning and he wondered if the name were Greek.

'That might mean the ''place of dark waters'',' he said.

'Na, na. Ye're wrong there, Mr Sempill. There's nae dark waters in Melanudrigill. There's the seven burns that rin south, but they're a' as clear as Aller. But dinna speak that name to ither folk, Mr Sempill, and dinna let on that Gibbie telled ye. It's a wanchancy name. Ye can cry it in a safe bit like the Hill o' Deer, but if ye was to breathe it in the Wud unco things might happen. I daurna speak my ain name among the trees.'

'Your name is Gibbie. Gibbie what?'

The man's face seemed to narrow in fear and then to expand in confidence. 'I can tell it to a minister o' the Word. It's Gilbert Niven. Ken ye where I got that name? In the Wud, sir. Ken ye wha gie'd it me? The Guid Folk. Ye'll no let on that I telled ye.'

The night was now fallen, and David turned for home, after one last look at the pit of blackness beneath him. The idiot hobbled beside him, covering the ground at a pace which tried even his young legs, and as he went he babbled.

'Tak' Gibbie's advice and keep far frae the Wud, Mr Sempill, and if ye're for Roodfoot or Calidon haud by the guid road. I've heard tell that in the auld days, when there was monks at the kirkton, they bode to gang out every year wi' bells and candles and bless the road to keep it free o' bogles. But they never ventured into the Wud, honest men. I'll no say but what a minister is mair powerfu' than a monk, but an eident body will run nae risks. Keep to fine caller bits like this Hill o' Deer, and if ye want to traivel gang west by Chasehope or east by Kirk Aller. There's nocht for a man o' God in the Wud.'

'Are there none of my folk there?'

For a second Gibbie stopped as if thunderstruck. 'Your folk!' he cried. 'In the Wud!' Then he perceived David's meaning. 'Na, na. There's nae dwallin' there. Nether Fennan is no far off and Reiverslaw is a bowshot from the trees, but to bide in the Wud! – Na, na, a man would be sair left to himsel' ere he ventured that! There's nae hoose biggit by human hand that wadna be clawed doun by bogles afore the wa' rase a span frae the grund.'

At the outfield of Mirehope Gibbie fled abruptly, chanting like a night bird.