
Opening Extract from...

The Blanket of the Dark

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Introduction by Robert Hutchinson

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Introduction

Henry VIII – 'by the grace of God, King of England, France and Lord of Ireland, Defender of the Faith and of the Church of England . . . on earth the Supreme Head' – was far from the bluff good King Hal of countless film and television productions. As John Buchan rightly portrays him in *The Blanket of the Dark*, England's most famous monarch was, in stark reality, a cruel despot – always careless of the lives of his subjects, always ruthless in his determination to safeguard the Tudor royal dynasty.

In truth, Henry had every reason to feel insecure.

The Tudors' hereditary claim to the throne of England was at best slender in its validity. Furthermore, it was secured only by right of conquest by his usurper father, Henry VII, on the field of Bosworth in 1485. Rebellions continually troubled both him and his descendants that bore the crown of England throughout the sixteenth century.

The Blanket of the Dark is set in 1536–7, as the flames of bloody insurrection again burn brightly in the east and north of England; this time triggered by the cynical dissolution of the monasteries and the common people's virulent hatred of the eponymous Thomas Cromwell, Henry's ambitious rags-to-riches chief minister. The 'Pilgrimage of Grace' and the subsequent uprisings in Yorkshire, Durham, Cumberland, Westmorland and Lancashire posed the gravest threats to Henry VIII's crown – far more serious to the security of the Tudor monarchy than the attempt by the Spanish Armada to overthrow his daughter Elizabeth just over five decades later.

Buchan's hero is the apparent foundling Peter Pentecost who proves to be the (fictional) lost son of Sir Edward Stafford, third Duke of Buckingham and Lord High Constable of England, who had been executed and attainted for treason fifteen years before.

Proud, arrogant Buckingham's vocal claims of royal descent had made him an ever-present latent threat to the Tudor throne, and his opposition to a new alliance with France became a tiresome political liability that piqued that arch-schemer and manipulator, Cardinal Wolsey. For his part, Henry had also grown jealous of the former royal favourite's huge land holdings, and now thoroughly mistrusted his loyalty.

Buckingham was therefore decapitated on 17 May 1521 on Tower Hill, after contrived and dubious evidence by his own spiritual adviser, the Carthusian monk Matthew Hopkins, was brought against him in a carefully controlled show trial. Three blows of the axe were necessary to sever his head from his body. He may have been a 'high and puissant prince' but in Yorkist and Tudor England, the old nobility never enjoyed anything more than a perilous existence in the fevered atmosphere at court of plot and counter-plot. (Indeed, his father was also hastily executed for high treason on Richard III's orders on 2 November 1483.)

Buchan graphically captures the grim atmosphere of fear and oppression that overlaid Henry VIII's fictional 'Merry England' – the choking blanket of the title – and conveys great empathy with the tyrant's subjects, oppressed by taxation and social and religious change. Not for them, the delights of Henry's lyrical *Past Time with Good Company*.

Through carefully drafted legislation, Cromwell had turned Henry's realm into what we today would recognise as a totalitarian, almost Stalinist state. The minister's widespread network of informers ensured that no man felt safe in his own home, nor so sure of himself as to dare express his opinion openly, for fear of retribution, as Buchan demonstrates. Cromwell's insidious propaganda, broadcast through specially com-

missioned dramatic spectacle or printed word, sought to mould and control the very minds and wills of the population on an unprecedented scale.

Moreover, Henry's seizure of the Pope's role as supreme head of the church in England and the growth of the Protestant 'new religion' created a heady cocktail for popular confusion, dismay and discontent. No surprise, then, that blimpish Sir Ralph Bonamy exclaims at one point in the novel: 'The pious everywhere are perturbed, since heretics sit in high places and the blasphemer is rampant in the land. [Cromwell's] commissioners go riding the roads, with the spoil of God's houses on their varlets' backs, copes for doublets and tunics for saddle-cloths. There are preachers who tell the folk that the Host is only a piece of baker's bread and that baptism is as lawful in a tub or ditch as in a holy font.'

The nobility, of course, were fiercely jealous of the rise of the talented low-born administrators and courtiers that Henry called into office and saw their traditional power and status in the land leeching away. Buchan recognises and grasps that deep-seated antagonism. He has Sir Gabriel Messynger complaining that 'The ancient nobility . . . were all large-featured and lean, the body being but a sheath for a strong spirit . . . Now comes the King and his race of new men, and they are all much cumbered with fat and overfull of blood. Above all, there is the King's grace. The Beast has come to rule in England and it is ousting men made in their Maker's image.'

However, some of the aristocracy learnt to swim with the Tudor tide. It is one of history's little ironies that Thomas Howard, third Duke of Norfolk – who had married one of Buckingham's daughters – shared his father-in-law's contempt and utter disdain for those now pulling the levers of power in England. Despite this, he was Henry's general in suppressing the northern uprisings and prosecuted, with relish, the king's personal and brutal orders to 'cause such dreadful execution upon a good number of the inhabitants, of every town, village and hamlet that have offended in this rebellion, as well as by the

hanging of them up on trees, as by the quartering them and setting their heads and quarters in every town, great and small, as may be a fearful spectacle to all hereafter that would practise any like matter'. Norfolk happily slaughtered hundreds of men whose religious and political ideals he passionately shared, in a contemptuous quest to win back royal favour and re-establish his pre-eminent position at court. His contempt for Henry's *nouveau riche* was mirrored by his equal scorn for the common people who offended against the established social order.

In Buchan's tale, Peter Pentecost, or Stafford, becomes the figurehead for a projected western rebellion by local magnates against Henry's tyranny and the denouement comes when he dramatically confronts the old ogre himself. Buchan's description of the king and his aura of supremacy is gripping: 'The face was vast and red as a new ham, a sheer mountain of a face, for it was as broad as it was long . . .' Peter 'hated him, for he saw the cunning behind the frank smile, the ruthlessness in the small eyes; but he could not blind himself to his power. Power of Mammon, power of Antichrist, power of the Devil maybe, but something born to work mightily in the world.'

Henry was the first English king to insist on 'majesty' being used as a term of address to him. He also nurtured dreams of imperial splendour, actively encouraged by Cromwell, and worked to transform England from a foggy, insignificant group of islands off the mainland of Europe, into a major player in the theatre of international politics. Here, perhaps, Buchan recognises the genesis of the British Empire and its later familiar and (to him) comfortable role as lawgiver and peacemaker over its colonised peoples. He has Henry utter, in ringing tones, the pledge: 'I will have no treason in this land . . . for it is treason not against my person . . . but against the realm of England.

'In Europe there is Caesar [the emperor Charles V of Spain] who has empire over men's bodies and the Pope who has empire over men's souls. I have sworn that I too shall be

imperial and England an empire . . . Before I die, I hope, with God's help, to make Scotland my vassal, so that the writ of England shall run from Thule and the Ebudes to the Narrow Seas. Only thus shall my people have peace, and as a peace-maker, I shall be called the child of God.'

Buchan also accurately encapsulates the anomalous nature of Henry's religious beliefs. To his death, the king believed he was a better Catholic than the Bishop of Rome, that he was indeed, God's personal deputy on earth. 'I am the devoutest man that ever wore ermine,' he assures Peter. 'If I have broken with the Pope, I will defend the faith better than he. No heretic shall breathe freely in this land while I sit on the throne . . . Every day I serve the priest at Mass, every Sunday I receive the holy bread, every Good Friday, I creep on my knees to the Cross' [in the old pre-Reformation liturgy that was later swept away by his son, Edward VI]. Henry insists: 'I am God's vice-regent on earth . . . therefore I sit in God's place.'

It must be nice to have that kind of larger-than-life self-confidence.

The Blanket of the Dark was first published in July 1931 and quickly went into five reprints in its first year. It was part of Buchan's prodigious literary output after he was elected a Scottish Unionist MP for the Scottish Universities in a by-election in 1927. A novel a year, he acknowledged frankly, was necessary to offset his expenses at Westminster and this book was sandwiched between *Castle Gay*, an adventure involving Buchan's most unlikely hero, the retired Glasgow grocer, Dickson McCunn, and *Gap in the Curtain*, which reprised Buchan's probable own alter ego Sir Edward Leithen, in a tale about predicting (and changing) the future. The same year as *Curtain*, Buchan also published a biography of Julius Caesar.

His historical novels may have been eclipsed in popularity by the timeless derring-do appeal of his adventure stories, but this is wholly wrong in my view. Their dialogue might sometimes seem a little contrived, or a little pedestrian, but they form a

corpus of powerful narratives which remain page-turners even to our jaded modern tastes. *The Blanket of the Dark* is one of the most compelling and, what is more, evokes the smell of real, naked fear in Tudor England.

Robert Hutchinson
July 2008

ONE

The Painted Floor

Peter Pentecost, from his eyrie among the hazels, looked down on the King's highway as it dipped from Stowood through the narrow pass to the Wood Eaton meadows. It was a King's highway beyond question, for it was the main road from London to Worcester and the west for those who did not wish to make Oxford a halting-place; but it was a mere ribbon of rutted turf, with on each side the statutory bowshot of cleared ground between it and the forest fringes. And, as he looked, he saw the seventh magpie.

Peter was country-bred and had country lore in the back of his mind. Also, being a scholar, he respected auspices. So, having no hat to doff, he pulled his forelock. Seven magpies in one day must portend something great.

He had set off that summer morning on an errand for the cellarer of Oseney Abbey to the steward of the King's manor of Beckley, some matter touching supplies for the Abbey kitchen. The sun had risen through lamb's-wool mists, the river was a fleckless sheet of silver, and Peter had consecrated the day to holiday. He had done his errand long before noon, and had spent an hour watching the blue lagoons on Otmoor (there was much water out, for July had begun with rains), with the white geese like foam on the edges. The chantry priest at Horton had given him food – a crust only and a drink of ale, for the priest was bitter poor – and in the afternoon he had wandered in the Stowood glades, where the priory of Studley had right of pannage and the good sisters' droves of swine rooted for earth-nuts. Peter was young, and holiday and high summertide could still intoxicate. He had lain on the spicy turf

of the open spaces, his nose deep in thyme and rock-rose; he had made verses in the shadow of the great oaks which had been trees when Domesday Book was written; he had told his dreams aloud to himself at the well under the aspens where the Noke fletchers cut their arrows. The hours had slipped by unnoted, and the twilight was beginning when he reached his favourite haunt, a secret armchair of rock and grass above the highway. He had seen four magpies, so something was on the way.

The first things he saw in the amethyst evening were two more of the pied birds, flapping down the hollow towards Wood Eaton. After them came various figures, for at that hour the road seemed to have woken into life. Travellers appeared on it like an evening hatch of gnats.

First came a couple of friars – Franciscans by their grey habits – who had been exploiting the faithful in the Seven Towns of Otmoor. Their wallets swung emptily, for the moormen had a poor repute among the religious. They would sleep the night, no doubt, in the Islip tithe-barn. After them appeared one of the Stowood hogwards, with the great cudgel of holly which was the badge of his trade. Peter knew what he was after. In the dusk he would get a rabbit or two for his supper on the edge of the Wood Eaton warren, for the hogwards were noted poachers.

From his view-point he could see half a mile down the road, from the foot of the hill to where it turned a corner and was lost in the oakwoods of the flats. It was like the stage of a Christmas mumming play, and Peter settled himself comfortably in his lair, and waited with zest for the entry of the next actors. This time it was a great wool-convoy, coming towards him from the Cherwell. He watched the laden horses strain up the slope, eleven of them, each like a monstrous slug buried in its woolpack. There were five attendants, four on foot and one riding a slim shaggy grey pony. They might be London bound, or more likely for Newbury, where Jack Winchcombe had his great weaving mill and the workmen wrought all day in sheds high

and dim as a minster – so many workmen that their master twenty years back had led his own battalion of spinners, carders and tuckers to Flodden Field. Peter viewed the convoy with no friendly eye. The wool barons were devouring the countryside, and ousting the peasants. He had seen with his own eyes hamlets obliterated by the rising tide of pasture. Up in Cotswold the Grevels and Celys and Midwinters might spend their wealth in setting up proud churches, but God would not be bribed. Let them remember Naboth's vineyard, those oppressors of the poor. Had not the good Sir Thomas More cried out that in England the sheep were eating up the men?

The next arrival was a troop of gipsies, a small furtive troop, three donkeys laden with gear, five men on foot, and two women, each with an infant at breast. In his childhood Peter remembered how these vagabonds had worn gaudy clothes and played openly on fantastic instruments of music; they were shameless priggers and rufflers, but they were welcomed everywhere except by the dwellers in lonely places, for they brought mirth and magic to the countryside. Now they were under the frown of the law, and at the will of any justice could be banished forth of England, for it was believed that among them they harboured Scots and Spaniards, and plotted against the King's peace. This troop were clad like common peasants, and drab and dingy at that, but there was no mistaking their lightfoot gait, and even at that distance Peter could mark their hazel-nut skins and bird-like beaks. They came on the stage stealthily, first reconnoitring the patch of open road, and, when they neared the other corner, sending out a scout to prospect ahead. Peter saw the scout turn his head and give a signal, and in a second the Egyptians, donkeys and all, had taken cover like weasels, and were deep in the wayside scrub.

Presently the cause was apparent. Down the hill trotted an imposing cavalcade, four gentlemen, no less than six servants armed with curtal-axes, and two led baggage-horses. One of the gentlemen was old, and his white hair mingled with the ermine collar of his purple cloak. The others rode cloakless in the warm

evening. Two had the look of lawyers, being all in black and white, except for their tawny horsemen's boots, but the fourth was a gay gallant, with a wine-red doublet, a laced shirt, sleeves monstrously puffed and slashed, and on his head a velvet bonnet with a drooping blue feather. Two of the servants carried at their saddle-bows the flat leather boxes which scriveners used. Peter guessed their errand. They were some of the commissioners whom the King was sending far and wide throughout the land to examine into the condition of the religious houses. Their destination might be the Augustinians at Bicester or the Benedictines at Eynsham – the latter he thought, for there were better roads to Bicester from London than this, and these men were doubtless from the capital. They were in a hurry, and passed out of sight at a sharp trot, the led horses shying at the smell of the gipsy donkeys hidden in the covert. In two hours' time they would be supping off Thames trout – for it was a Friday – in the Eynsham fratry.

When the last of the company had jolted round the far corner the stage was empty for a while. The amethyst was going out of the air, and giving place to that lemon afterglow which in a fine summer never leaves the sky till it is ousted by the splendours of dawn. The ribbon of road was beginning to glimmer white, and the high wooded sides of the glen to lose their detail to the eye and become massed shadows. . . . But the play was not yet ended, for up the road towards him came a solitary rider.

Down a gap from the west fell a shaft of lingering sunlight which illumined the traveller. Peter saw a tall man mounted on a weedy roan, which seemed to have come far, for it stumbled at the lift of the hill. His head was covered with an old plumeless bonnet, he had no cloak, his doublet was plain grey, his trunks seemed to be of leather, and between them and his boots were hose of a dingy red. He wore a narrow belt fastened in front with a jewel, and from that belt hung a silver dagger-sheath, while at his side dangled a long sword. But it did not need the weapons to proclaim that this was no servant.

The man's whole poise spoke of confidence and pride. His shaven face was weathered like a tinker's, his eyes searched the covert as if looking for opposition, his mouth was puckered to a whistle, and now and then he flung back his head and sniffed the evening odours.

Peter watched and admired with a pain at his heart. Here was one who rode the broad ways of the world and feared nothing; a masterful man who would have his way with life; one who had seen with his own eyes that wonderful earth of which Peter had only read; a fierce soul who would be a deadly enemy, but who might also be a delectable comrade, for there was ease and jollity in his air. Peter sighed at this glimpse of the unattainable.

And then he saw the seventh magpie.

The heats of the day, the constant feasting of the eyes upon blue horizons, had had the effect of wine upon Peter's brain, and this drunkenness had been increased by the spectacle of the masterful traveller. The scholar, whose days were spent among books, felt himself within hail of the pomp of life. He had almost forgotten the heavy thoughts which had burdened him so many days. The hour was growing late, and he was miles from his bed in the Castle precincts, but he had no intention of going home yet awhile. For he was near to a place which was his own discovery, his special sanctuary, and he was minded to visit it before he slept. . . .

And then came the seventh magpie, a chequered zigzag in that dim world. The bird was an invitation to adventure. Peter rose from his eyrie, shook the moss and twigs from his clothes, and scrambled down the slope to the highway. He was clad in a tunic and long summer hose of thin woollen, and his gown, which was the badge of studentship, he carried loose on his arm.

He padded in the sweet-smelling dust of the road for a little way, and then turned to his left to climb the farther side of the hollow. He had forgotten about the Egyptians in the covert. They were still there, and had settled down for the night, for suddenly he saw in a cleft beside him the glow of a little fire on which a

pot was bubbling. He was too late to avoid it, his foot slipped, he slid into the cleft, and found a hand at his throat. The hand was relaxed, and the grip changed to his shoulder, while a small covered lantern was flashed in his face.

Shaken and startled, he saw one of the gipsies standing above him, a man with a thin wolfish face and burning eyes. Peter's youth and the sight of the gown on his arm apparently convinced the man that here was no danger. He grunted, and picked up what seemed to be a book which had fallen to the ground.

'You are far from home, clerk,' the voice said. 'What do you at this hour prowling in Stowood? You are not of the Children of the Moon.'

The Egyptians bore an ill name for secret robbery and murder, and Peter's heart had pounded on his side when he felt the clutch at his throat. But this man whom he could only see dimly, a grey ghost flecked with firelight, seemed no marauder. His voice was not the Egyptian whine, and his words were not the Egyptian jargon. In spite of his rags he had a certain air of breeding and authority. The other gipsies were busy with their cooking, and the women were suckling their babes, but this man seemed to be engaged with papers and he had the lantern to light him. Peter realised that the gaze fixed on him was devouring and searching, but not hostile.

'A clerk,' said the man. 'One of the blind eyes and dumb mouths that have Oxford for their stepmother. I have forgot what Oxford is like. Do you still plough the barren fields of the Trivium and the Quadrivium? Do you yet mumble the leavings of Aristotle? Are your major gods Priscian and Cato and Alexander of Villa Dei? Is the hand that leads you up Parnassus that of old John Leland? *Ut rosa flos florum sic Leland grammaticorum* – it is so long since I heard it I have lost the jingle. Or perhaps you are for the new masters, for I hear that to-day in Oxford the Trojans are few and the Grecians many?'

'Troy has fallen,' said Peter, amazed to hear such speech from a gipsy's tongue.

'And her folk are scattered. They have put Duns and Aquinas in Bocardo. They tell me that the great vellum leaves of the Sentences flap in the wind about the college courts, and that country louts gather them to make flappers to keep the deer within the pales.'

'What know you of Oxford and her ways?' the stupefied Peter demanded.

'This much,' said the man fiercely, 'that her ways are not the paths of truth, and that her fruits, old or new, are but husks to be flung to swine. I tell you, clerk, there is only one new learning, and that is the ancientest. It is here,' and he held up his book, 'and it is old and yet ever young. For it is the wisdom not of man but of God.'

'Show it me,' said Peter, but the man put it behind his back.

'Not yet, clerk. England is not yet ripe for it, but the hour draws near.'

'Who are you that speak in riddles?'

The man laughed. 'Under the blanket of the dark all men are alike and all are nameless. Let me view your countenance that I may know it when I meet it again.'

He held up the lantern, and the light also revealed his own face. It was that of a man in early middle life, very lean and haggard, with a long nose broken in the middle, and eyes that seemed to burn in a fever. But the brow was broad and fine, and the mouth was gentle.

'An honest face,' he said. 'You were no churl's get, young clerk. . . . Now get you hence to your prayers, and leave me to mine.'

During this short dialogue the other gipsies had taken no notice of Peter. He felt the thrust of the man's hand, and in a moment he was out of the hollow and the firelight and back in the midnight dusk of the woods.

He ran now, for his head was in a whirl. The magpie was a wise bird, for that night he was indeed seeing portents. He had observed one kind of authority mounted and jingling on the highway, and now he had witnessed another kenneling with the

gipsies. The world was strange and very wide. It was time for him to find his sanctuary, where he could adjust these new experiences and think his own thoughts.

The place was his very own, for he had unearthed it after it had been lost for centuries. In a charter in Oseney he had read how the King of Wessex had given to the Bishop of Winchester a piece of land by Cherwell side, which ran from a certain brook 'along the green valley by the two little hills and past the Painted Floor,' till it reached a certain thorn patch and a certain spring. The words had fired his fancy. Once the Romans had strode over these hills, the ruins of their massive causewayed high-roads ran through marsh and forest, they had set their houses with vines and reaped their harvests where now only wild beasts rustled. To one like Peter, most of whose waking thoughts dwelt on Greece and Italy, the notion of such predecessors among his familiar fields seemed to link his wildest dreams to the solid world of fact. That Painted Floor must be found, for it could only be a fragment of Roman work; there was such a floor in the midget church of Widford on Windrush, a mile or two from the home of his childhood. He knew the green valley and the little hills of the charter; they lay east from Wood Eaton, between the demesne of that manor and the ridge of Stowood. The Romans had been there beyond doubt, for not long since a ditcher in that very place had turned up a pot of gold coins with Emperors' heads on them – some were now at Oseney among the Abbey's treasures.

So Peter had spent the dry March days nosing like a fox in the shallow glade which dropped from the high slopes to the Wood Eaton meads. The Painted Floor was not among the run-rigs of beans and oats and barley, nor in the trodden grass of the common pastureland; it must be nearer the hills, among the rough meadows where the brook had its source, or in the patches of oaken scrub which were the advance pickets of the forest. . . . He found it – found it one April day in a coppice of ash and thorn, guided to it by a sudden flatness in ground which nature had clearly made hummocky. It was a floor

indeed, carpeted with fine turf and painted only with primroses and windflowers. Peter's nails clawed up the turf and came on tiles, and in an hour he had cleared a yard or two and revealed what even in the dusk of the trees showed brighter colours than earth and stone.

Peter borrowed an axe and a mattock from an Elsfield forester, and, with the tools hidden in his gown, journeyed to the spinney every hour of holiday. In places seeds had found lodgment among the tiles, and had grown to trees, the roots of which split the mosaic. In one part a badger had made his earth and powdered a yard or two into dust. But when Peter had cut down encroaching saplings and had stripped off the layers of turf, there lay revealed a hundred square yards of tesselated pavement. Perhaps since Roman days the place had been used as a sheepfold, for there were signs of a later circumscribing wall, but once beyond doubt it had been the floor of a Roman's dwelling. . . . Peter fetched water from the spring among the bracken, and washed off the dirt of centuries. Bit by bit he unveiled a picture. In the centre, in the midst of an intricate design of grape leaves, sat a figure of some goddess – Ceres perhaps or Proserpina. At each corner were great plaques which presently revealed themselves as the Four Seasons – Spring with Pan's pipes, Summer with a lap of flowers, Autumn lifting aloft a cornucopia, and Winter a fur-clad hunter holding a rabbit. And all between was a delicate maze of convolutions so that the central goddess seemed to float upon clouds. It was simple rustic work, for the greys were the limestone rock, and the yellows and browns a neighbouring sandstone, and the blue slate or glass, and the reds coarse earthenware; but the design had a beauty which to Peter was a revelation. He felt it akin to the grave music with which sundry Roman poets had ravished his soul.

The place was forest land, he knew, and therefore belonged to the King, though it was very near the Wood Eaton clearing and Sir Ralph Bonamy's ground. But it was his own by the oldest

and strongest tenure, effective occupation. No one but himself knew of this marvel. He concealed his movements going and coming as if his purpose had been crime. The Wood Eaton churls were not likely to drag their heavy feet to a place where there were neither tasks to be wrought at nor coneys to be snared, and the foresters would neglect a trivial spinney which offered no harbourage to deer. Only Peter had business there. He would lie in the covert in a hot noon, watching the sun make a chequer of green and gold, till he fell asleep, and awoke, startled, to see what for a moment he thought was the shimmer of a woman's gown and to hear the call of an elfin flageolet. But it was only fancy. The Floor was dim with dusk, and the wood was silent but for homing birds.

To-night he crossed the brackeny meadow and came to the coppice with a sudden wild expectation. The seventh magpie! There had been marvels many that day, but a seventh magpie must portend still more. The spring bubbled noisily among its greenery; he had never heard it so loud. He lay prone and drank a great draught of the icy water, so cold that it sent little pains running behind his eyes. Then he entered the coppice.

It had been his custom to treat it as a sacred place and to enter with reverent feet and head uncovered. Nor did he enter it direct. He would fetch a circuit and come in from the top to his own perch above the Floor, like a seat in one of the tiers of an amphitheatre looking down on the arena. So he climbed the slope to where half a dozen great oaks hung like sentinels above the coppice, and found his way downhill through the scrub of hazels and briers. The moon was already well up in the heavens, and the turf was white as with frost, but inside the wood it was dark till he reached the edge of the Floor. There, since the taller trees fell back from it, light was permitted to enter from the sky.

Peter parted the bushes, found a seat of moss between two boulders, and looked down from the height of perhaps twenty feet upon the moon-silvered stage.

The Floor had a sheen on it, so that the colours were lost in a glimmer of silver. The colours, but not the design. The enthroned Ceres in the heart of it seemed like a reflection of a great statue in a deep clear pool. Bits of the corner plaques could be seen too – the swung rabbit in Winter's hand, half of Autumn's cornucopia, more than half of Summer's lapful of flowers.

The place was very quiet. It had the scent of all woodland places in high summer – mosses, lush foliage, moist earth which has had its odours drawn out by a strong sun. There was also a faint sweetness of cut hay from the distant Wood Eaton fields, and something aromatic and dry, which was the savour of stone and tile and ancient crumbling mortar. There seemed to be no life in the thicket, though a few minutes before the world had rustled with the small noises of insect and bird. At that hour there should have been sleeping doves in the boughs, and hunting owls, and rasping nightjars looking for ewes and she-goats to milk. Or the furtive twist of a stoat, or the pad of a homing badger. But there were none of these things, no sound even of a wandering vapour; only the moonlight, the scents, and the expectant silence.

But surely there was movement, though it was soundless. Peter, entranced with the magic of the place and hour, saw in the steady radiance of the moon shadows slip across the Floor. It almost seemed as if Ceres had lifted her hands from their eternal entwinement. The flowers had shifted in Summer's lap, Spring had fingered her pipe. . . .

Peter crossed himself with a shaking finger and began a prayer. Suddenly company had come out of the night. He realised that he was not alone.

Something was moving on the Painted Floor, something which so blended with the moonlight that its presence could be known only when it obscured the pattern. . . . From where he sat, Peter looked beyond the little amphitheatre to a gap in the encircling coppice, a gap through which could be seen the descending glade and a segment of far hills. The moonlight

on the Floor, being framed in trees, was an intenser glow than the paler landscape beyond. Suddenly against this pallor a figure was silhouetted – the figure of a girl.

Peter tried to pray. He tried to say a prayer to the Mother of God which was his favourite invocation in emergencies. It began, *Imperatrix supernorum, Superatrix infernorum*, but he did not get as far as *superatrix*. For he found that he had not the need to pray. His fear had been only momentary. His heart was beating fast, but not with terror. The sight before him was less an invocation to prayer than an answer to it. Into his own secret sanctuary had come the appropriate goddess.

It was a mortal who danced below him – of that he had instant and complete assurance. The misty back world of Peter's mind, for all his schooling, held a motley of queer folk, nymphs, fays, witch-wives, who had their being on the edge of credence. But this was not of that kind. It was a mortal with blood in her veins. . . . She had flung up her arms, when she showed in the gap, in a very rapture of youth. . . . He had seen her head clear – eyes over which the eyelids drooped, a smiling mouth, a delicate face on a slim neck. . . . Her garments were now drawn tight round her, and now floated wide like the robes of a fleeing nymph on a Greek gem. They seemed to be white, but all of her was white in the moon. Her hair was silvered and frosted, but it might be gold or ebony by day. Slim and blanched, she flitted and spun like a leaf or a blown petal, but every line of her, every movement, spoke of youth and a rich, throbbing, exultant life.

The pattern of her dance seemed to be determined by the pictures under her feet. Sometimes she tripped down the convolutions and whorls till the eyes dazzled. At the corner plaques she fitted her movements to their design – wild in Spring, languorous in Summer, in Autumn a bacchanal, in Winter a tempest. Before the throned Ceres she became a hierophant, and her dance a ritual. Once she sank to the ground, and it seemed that her lips rested on the goddess's face.

Never before had Peter stared at a woman and drunk in the glory of her youth and grace. He had seen very few, and had

usually passed them with averted eyes. They were the devil's temptation to the devout, and a notorious disturbance to the studious. But this woman had come into his sanctuary and made free with it as of right. He could not deny that right, and, since the sanctuary was his, the two were irrevocably linked together. They were worshippers at the same secret shrine. . . . He looked at her more calmly now. He saw the pride and nimbleness of motion, the marvellous grace of body, the curves of the cheek as the head was tilted backwards. It was a face stamped indelibly on his memory, though under the drooped eyelids he could not see the eyes.

Afterwards, when he reconstructed the scene, Peter held that he fell into a kind of waking dream, from which he awoke with a start to realise that the dance was ended and the Floor empty. The moon had shifted its position in the sky, and half the Floor was in shadow. There was still no fear in his mind and no regret. The nymph had gone, but she would return. She must return, as he must, to this place which had laid its spell upon both. . . . He felt very drowsy, so he found a bigger patch of moss, made a pillow of his gown, and went to sleep in that warm green dusk which is made for dreams.

But he was too young and too healthily tired to dream. He woke, as was his habit, at sunrise, sniffed the morning, and turned round to sleep for another hour. Then he rose, when the trees were still casting long shadows on the meadow and the Painted Floor was dim with dew, and took the road towards Wood Eaton and its little river. He would not go back to Oxford yet awhile, he decided, but would seek his breakfast at Oseney, which was without the gates. He came to the Cherwell at a narrow place overhung with willows; there he stripped, bundled his clothes inside his gown, and tossed the whole to the farther bank. Then he dived deep into the green waters, and thereafter dried himself by cantering like a colt among the flags and meadowsweet. The bath had sharpened both his energy and his hunger, so that he passed at a trot the Wood Eaton granges and crossed the Campsfield moor, where the shepherds and cow-

herds were marshalling their charges for the day. Presently he was looking into a valley filled with trees and towers, with, on the right, below a woody hill, the spire of a great church set among glistening streams.