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Opening Extract from...

The Free Fishers

Written by John Buchan

Introduction by Douglas Hurd

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Introduction

Note to the reader:
This introduction contains some key plot developments.

John Buchan published his last historical novel, *The Free Fishers*, in 1934 at the age of fifty-nine. He was already famous both as a public servant, a Member of Parliament, a historian and even more as a novelist. His fame stretched out beyond the written word; 1934 was the year in which Alfred Hitchcock was filming the celebrated version of Buchan's most popular thriller, *The Thirty-Nine Steps*. Meanwhile, Buchan was living a comfortable, well-recognised life, spending most of his time in his house at Elsfield on the ridge overlooking Oxford.

But being a complicated man he was not content with literary fame, a happy family and the flow of celebrities whom he entertained at Elsfield. Although he did his best to conceal his vexation he was deeply disappointed that neither Ramsay McDonald nor Stanley Baldwin thought of promoting him into the Cabinet of the National Government of 1931 from his position as a loyal backbench MP. Before long he found himself moving from the active to the ceremonial dimension of politics. For two years he served as the Lord High Commissioner, the King's representative to the Church of Scotland. In 1934 negotiations began which ended the following year in his appointment as Governor-General of Canada.

In *The Free Fishers* John Buchan brought together the gifts and tastes which struggled for primacy in his own life. He was a Scot who loved England, an academic who admired dramatic action, a Conservative with a sympathy for radicalism, a man of conventional habits who was fascinated by secret societies. One such society was

that of the Free Fishers. This gathering of good-hearted smugglers gives the novel its name, but they lurk in the background as the story unfolds. In earlier novels, notably *The Blanket of the Dark*, Buchan had supposed an ancient and secret network spread across England whose members travelled through the forests rather than over the main roads. They travelled faster than anyone on the King's highway. They were poachers and gypsies who kept ancient traditions and stood for the old values. In *The Blanket of the Dark* these men are English to the bone, ready to rise to put a young English nobleman on the throne in place of Henry VIII, the usurping Welsh Tudor. In *The Free Fishers* by contrast they are Scots seamen who began with the loyalty of smugglers to each other, but moved towards a conventional patriotic determination to save the country from Napoleon.

Buchan's hero Anthony Lammas is a proper young man, a Minister of the Kirk and Professor of Logic at St Andrews University. He is commissioned by the University to undertake a negotiation with the authorities in London but his mission develops amazing complications. He never gets to London. In Edinburgh he is caught up in the rivalry of two of his aristocratic pupils in love with the same girl, but that first complication is simplicity itself compared with what follows.

Buchan uses his hero's journey southward to display his impressive talent for describing weather and landscape. I cannot think of another prose writer in the twentieth century who can match him in this art. In *The Free Fishers* he fits the action of his plot to the clouds, rain, sunshine, mountains and valleys through which Lammas passes. Here for example he is approaching the English border after a night in the mail coach.

> Sunrise was not far off but the mist dimmed the first premonition of it from the East, and though the nostrils smelt dawn, the eyes were still in night. The morning was windless except for tiny salt airs that rose like exhalations from the abyss on the left which was the sea. The road had become a sort of switchback among shallow glens and

> the befogged lamps showed that it was bounded by no paling or hedge or dry stone dyke, but marched directly with bent and heather. Curlews were beginning to call like souls lost in the brume. They reminded Mr Lammas of spring days at Snowdoun under the Ochils and at Catlaw in Tweeddale.

The different strands of the action come together a little later in a bleak Northumbrian valley high in the Cheviots called Hungrygrain. A beautiful lady lives there with her brutish husband. Is she as reported a vicious Jacobin conspirator anxious to conspire for a French invasion? Is her husband as doltish as he appears? By this time Lammas is in alliance with an arrogant, dashing Regency buck Sir Turnour Wyse whose speciality is the driving of carriages down dangerous roads. By the time we realise that the principal lady is virtuous as well as beautiful, Anthony Lammas and Sir Turnour Wyse have become fully developed characters.

The original purpose of their mission has by now been forgotten. The heroic little band are bustling south to forestall a conspiracy to assassinate the Prime Minister. Sir Turnour and some of the others take the fast route by sea with the Free Fishers. Lammas ends up captured by the principal villain and locked up in a disreputable inn near Huntingdon. He is threatened with execution, to be carried out at a particular hour. The Prime Minister, lured by an appeal for help, sets out from London to the same rendezvous. Meanwhile, Sir Turnour and his colleagues, knowing that time is desperately short, are hurtling westward towards Huntingdon from their landing point in Norfolk. Having hijacked a Royal Mail coach, they divert on to a lesser road. Suddenly a post appears in the middle of the track. Sir Turnour (and Buchan) show their mastery of technical detail.

> He had his wheelers tight in hand and sharply drew back their reins, causing them to throw up their heads which,

> acting on the pole chains, jerked the bar over the post's top. At the same moment, hitting the near wheeler, he brought the splinter-bar clear. Neither coach, horse nor harness touched the post . . . 'By God sir,' Robin gasped, 'that is the nicest piece of coachmanship I have ever seen, an everlasting miracle I calls it.' 'Simple enough,' said Sir Turnour coolly. 'If you keep your head and know the meaning of proper harnessing . . . that is why I took such pains at Ely.'

They arrive at the inn just in time to rescue Lammas from being murdered, and the beautiful lady from torture. The Prime Minister arrives to thank and congratulate all concerned. Lammas has by now fallen in love with the lady, but she prefers one of the young lordlings, and Lammas returns wiser and only a little sad to his books at St Andrews and no doubt an occasional outing with the Free Fishers.

It is possible to smile at and yet thoroughly enjoy the pace of the story, the straightforwardness of the characters and the dramatic variety of their experiences. There is one oddity on which Buchan does not comment. His Prime Minister is Spencer Perceval, which dates the action to somewhere between 1810 and 1812. In *The Free Fishers*, as we have seen, Perceval is rescued and lives on. In real life he was shot and killed by an aggrieved businessman John Bellingham in the House of Commons on 11 May 1812. The truth was more catastrophic than even Buchan's fiction.

Those of us who read and admire John Buchan came to him down different paths. My memory goes back seventy years to the first class library of my prep school at Twyford, Winchester, endowed as a memorial to old boys killed in the Great War. There in a formidable mass of hardback covers were arrayed the adventure stories of India and Victorian Africa, G A Henty, Rider Haggard and the rest. On the lower shelves and more popular with us were the moderns of our time – Buchan, Sapper

and, for a giggle, Dornford Yates. Although I have not been to look I fear that the Victorians may now have yielded space for the next generation led by Ian Fleming and James Bond. This new edition of Buchan suggests to me that he will stay the course quite as effectively as Ian Fleming. True, he gives us only occasional and disguised glimpses of sexual attraction and unlike Fleming he does not thrust violence in our faces to make us gasp. We can smile affectionately at some of Buchan's old-fashioned dialogue. But within a minute or two we are caught up in the pace of the story, the drive to a dramatic conclusion by characters, villains and heroes whom we have come to appreciate. In his novels set in the past Buchan lovingly creates the context with the skill of a passionate historian brought up on Sir Walter Scott. But Buchan is in love not just with history but with the changing face of the English and Scottish landscape and fascinated by the motive of those who risk their lives and reputations for a cause.

Douglas Hurd
July 2009

ONE

In Which a Young Man is Afraid of his Youth

Mr Anthony Lammas, whose long legs had been covering ground at the rate of five miles an hour, slackened his pace, for he felt the need of ordering a mind which for some hours had been dancing widdershins. For one thing the night had darkened, since the moon had set, and the coast track which he followed craved wary walking. But it was the clear dark of a northern April, when, though the details are blurred, the large masses of the landscape are apprehended. He was still aware of little headlands descending to a shadowy gulf which was the Firth. Far out the brazier on the May was burning with a steady glow, like some low-swung planet shaming with its ardour the cold stars. He sniffed the sharp clean scent of the whins above the salt; he could almost detect the brightness of their flowering. They should have been thyme, he thought, thyme and arbutus and tamarisk clothing the capes of the Sicilian sea, for this was a night of Theocritus . . . .

Theocritus! What had he to do with Theocritus? It was highly necessary to come to terms with this mood into which he had fallen.

For Mr Lammas, a licensed minister of the Kirk and a professor in the University of St Andrews, had just come from keeping strange company. Three years ago, through the good offices of his patron and friend, Lord Snowdoun, he had been appointed to the Chair of Logic and Rhetoric, with emoluments which, with diet money and kain-hens, reached the sum of £309 a year, a fortune for a provident bachelor. His father, merchant and boat-builder in the town of Dysart, had left him also a small patrimony, so that he was in no way cumbered with

material cares. His boyhood had been crowded with vagrant ambitions. At the burgh school he had hankered after the sea; later, the guns in France had drawn him to a soldier's life, and he had got as far as Burntisland before a scandalized parent reclaimed him. Then scholarship had laid its spell on him. He had stridden to the top of his Arts classes in St Andrews, and at Edinburgh had been well thought of as a theologian. His purpose then was the lettered life, and he had hopes of the college living of Tweedsmuir, far off in the southern moorlands, where he might cultivate the Muses and win some such repute as that of Mr Beattie at Aberdeen.

But Lord Snowdoun had shown him the way to better things, for to be a professor at twenty-five was to have a vantage-ground for loftier ascents. In the Logic part of his duties he had little interest, contenting himself with an exposition of Mr Reid's *Inquiry* and some perfunctory lectures on Descartes, but in the Rhetoric classes, which began after Candlemas, his soul expanded, and he had made himself a name for eloquence. Also he had discovered an aptitude for affairs, and was already entrusted with the heavy end of college business. A year ago he had been appointed Questor, a post which carried the management of the small academic revenues. He stood well with his colleagues, well with the students, and behind him was Lord Snowdoun, that potent manager of Scotland. Some day he would be Principal, when he would rival the fame of old Tullidelph, and meantime as a writer he would win repute far beyond the narrow shores of Fife. Had he not in his bureau a manuscript treatise on the relations of art and morals which, when he re-read it, astounded him by its acumen and wit, and a manuscript poem on the doings of Cardinal Beatoun which he could not honestly deem inferior to the belauded verse of Mr Walter Scott!

So far the path of ambition, in which for a man of twenty-eight he had made notable progress. Neat in person, a little precise in manner, his mouth primmed to a becoming gravity, his hair brushed back from his forehead to reveal a lofty brow, Mr

Lammas was the very pattern of a dignitary in the making. . . . And yet an hour ago he had been drinking toddy with shaggy seafarers, and joining lustily in the chorus of 'Cocky Bendy', and the tune to which his long legs had been marching was 'Dunbarton's Drums'. He was still whistling it:

> Dunbarton's drums are bonnie O—
> I'll leave a' my friends and my daddie O—
> I'll bide nae mair at hame, but I'll follow wi' the drum,
> And whenever it beats I'll be ready O.

This was a pretty business for a minister of the Kirk, the Questor of St Andrews, and a professor of divine philosophy.

There was a long story behind it. As a boy his playground had been the little rock-girt port of Dysart, and as the son of honest David Lammas, who could build a smack with any man between Berwick and Aberdeen, he had been made free of the harbour life. His intimates had been men who took their herring busses far north into the cold Shetland seas, whalers who sailed yearly for the Faeroes and Iceland and still stranger waters, skippers of Dutch luggers and Norway brigs who leavened their lawful merchantry with commodities not approved by law. He learned their speech and the tricks of their calling, and listened greedily to their tales through many a summer twilight. Sometimes he went to the fishing himself in the shore-cobles, but his dream was to sail beyond the May to the isles of the basking sharks and the pilot-whales and the cliffs snowy with sea-fowl. Only the awe of his father kept him from embarking one fine morning in a Middleburg lugger with tulips in its cabin, and a caged singing-bird whose pipe to his ear was the trumpet of all romance.

There was a brotherhood among the sea-folk as close and secret as a masonic order. Its name was the Free Fishers of Forth, but its name was not often spoken. To be a member was to have behind one, so long as one obeyed its rules, a posse of stalwart allies. It had been founded long ago – no man knew when, though there were many legends. Often it had fallen

foul of the law, as in the Jacobite troubles, when it had ferried more than one much-sought gentleman between France and Scotland. Its ostensible purpose was the protection of fisher rights, and a kind of cooperative insurance against the perils of the sea, but these rights were generously interpreted, and there had been times when free-trade was its main concern, and the east-coast gaugers led a weary life. But the war with France had drawn it to greater things. Now and then the ship of a Free Fisher may have conveyed an escaping French prisoner to his own country, but it is certain that they brought home many a British refugee who had struggled down to the Breton shore. Also the fraternity did famous secret services. They had their own private ways of gleaning news, and were often high in repute with an anxious Government. Letters would arrive by devious ways for this or that member, and a meeting would follow in some nook of the coast with cloaked men who did not easily grasp the Fife speech. More than once the Chief Fisher, old Sandy Kyles, had consulted in Edinburgh behind guarded doors with the Lord Advocate himself.

To the boy the Free Fishers had been the supreme authority of his world, far more potent than the King in London. He cherished every hint of their doings that came to him, but he fell in docilely with the ritual and asked no questions. As he grew older he learned more, and his notion of the brotherhood was clarified; some day he would be a member of it like his father before him. But when he chose the path of scholarship he had to revise his ambitions, since the society was confined strictly to those whose business lay with the sea. Yet the harbourside was still his favourite haunt, and he went on adding to his seafaring friendships.

'I'll tell you what,' he told his chief ally, Tam Dorrit. 'If I cannot be a member, I'll be your chaplain. When I'm a minister you'll appoint me. King George has his chaplain, and Lord Snowdoun, and all the great folk, and what for no the Free Fishers?'

The notion, offered half in jest, simmered in the heads of the brotherhood, for they liked the lad and did not want to lose him,

if fate should send him to some landward parish. So it came about that when Mr Lammas had passed his trials and won his licence to preach, a special sederunt of the Free Fishers took place, and he was duly appointed their chaplain, with whatever rights, perquisites, and privileges might inhere in that dignity. In due course he was installed at a supper, where the guests, a little awed by the shadow of the Kirk, comported themselves with a novel sobriety. Then for a year or two he saw nothing of them. He was engaged by Lord Snowdoun as the governor of his heir, the young Lord Belses, and passed his time between the great house of Snowdoun under the Ochils, the lesser seat of Catlaw in Tweeddale, and his lordship's town lodgings in Edinburgh. Ambition had laid its spell on him, high-jinks were a thing of the past, and he was traversing that stage of ruthless worldly-wisdom which follows on the passing of a man's first youth. It was a far cry from the echoing chambers and orderly terraces of Snowdoun or the deep heather of Catlaw to the windy beaches of Fife.

But with his return to St Andrews he found himself compelled to pick up the threads of his youth. The stage of premature middle-age had passed, and left him with a solid ambition, indeed, but with a more catholic outlook on the world. He had to deal with young men, and his youth was his chief asset; he had strong aspirations after literary success – in youthful spheres, too, like poetry and fantastic essays. He dared not bolt the door against a past which he saw daily in happier colours. The Free Fishers had not forgotten him. They had solemnly congratulated their chaplain on his new dignity, and they invited him to their quarterly gatherings at this or that port of the Firth. The message was never by letter; it would come by devious means, a whispered word in the street or at the harbour-side or on the links from some shaggy emissary who did not wait to be questioned.

At first Mr Lammas had been shy of the business. Could a preceptor of youth indulge in what was painfully akin to those extravagances of youth against which the Senatus warred?

He had obeyed the first summons with a nervous heart, and afterwards the enterprise was always undertaken in the deepest secrecy. No chaise or saddle-horse for him; his legs carried him in the evening to the rendezvous, however distant, and brought him back in the same fashion. From the side of the Free Fishers, however, he knew that he need fear nothing, for they were silent as the tomb. So into the routine of his life came these hiatuses of romance with a twofold consequence. They kept his hand in for his dealings with his pupils. He became 'Nanty' to the whole undergraduate world, from the bejant to the magistrand. His classes were popular and orderly, and many consulted him on private concerns which they would not have broached to any other professor. Also, as if to salve his conscience, he began to cultivate a special gravity in his deportment. Among his colleagues he spoke little, but what he said was cogent; he acquired a name for whinstone common sense; he was a little feared and widely trusted. Soon his gravity became a second nature, and his long upper lip was a danger-signal to folly. Yet all the while he was nursing his private fire of romance in the manuscripts accumulating in his study drawers, and once in a while those fires were permitted to flicker in public. After a dull day of Senatus meetings, when he would reprehend the plunderings by his colleagues of the College library, or frame new rules for the compulsory Sunday service in St Leonard's Kirk and the daily Prayer-hall at St Mary's, or bicker with Dr Wotherspoon, the Professor of Moral Philosophy, over the delimitations of his subject, he would find himself among his boyhood's friends, bandying queer by-names and joining in most unacademic choruses.

This night the supper had been at Pittenweem. All day Mr Lammas had been engaged on high affairs. There was trouble over the University revenue from the Priory lands, which was a discretionary grant from the Exchequer; Government had shown itself unwilling to renew it on the old terms, and it had been decided that Mr Lammas should proceed forthwith to London, lay the matter before Lord Snowdoun, and bespeak his

lordship's interest. It was a notable compliment to the young man, and a heavy responsibility. Also he had received a letter from Lord Mannour, who as Mr Peter Kinloch had been the University's standing counsel, begging him to wait upon him without delay in Edinburgh. Mr Lammas, cumbered with such cares and about to set out on a difficult journey, had been in no mood for the Free Fishers, and had almost let the occasion slip. But some perverse loyalty had set his feet on the shore-road, and for some hours he had been absorbed, not unhappily, into a fantastic world.

The sederunt had been the queerest in his recollection. The great boat-shed on the edge of the tide had been bright at first with a red sunset, but presently the April dusk had gathered, and ships' lanterns, swung from the rafters, had made patches of light among its shadows. Beneath, round the rude table, had sat fifty and more shaggy seafarers, each one entering the guarded door with the pass-word for the night. Old Sandy Kyles was dead, and in the chair of the Chief Fisher sat Eben Garnock, a mountainous man with a beard like Moses and farsighted blue eyes beneath penthouse brows. There were gaps in the familiar company, and Mr Lammas heard how one had lost his boat and his life off the Bass in the great January storm, and another had shipwrecked at Ushant and was now in a French gaol. But there was a goodly number of old friends – Tam Dorrit, who had once taken him on a memorable run to the Eastern Banks; Andrew Cairns, who had sailed his smack far into the unpermitted Baltic; the old man Stark who, said rumour, had been a pirate in western waters; and young Bob Muschat, a new member, who had bird-nested with him many a Saturday in the Dunnikier woods. There were faces that were new to him, and he noted that they were of a wilder cast than those he first remembered. The war was drawing the Free Fishers into odd paths. There were men there who had been pressed for the Navy and had seen Trafalgar, men who had manned privateers and fought obscure fights in forgotten seas, men who on Government business had talked in secret chambers with great folk and risked their

lives in the dark of the moon. It was not his recovered boyhood that Mr Lammas saw, but a segment of a grimmer world whose echoes came faintly at intervals to St Andrews halls.

The company had been piped to meat by a bosun's whistle, and they had said the Fisher's Grace, which begins:

> For flukes and partans, cakes and ale,
> Salty beef and seein' kale—

and concludes with a petition for the same mercies at the next meeting. There was no formality round their table, but there was decorum, the decorum of men for whom the world was both merry and melancholy. They faced death daily, so even in their cups they could not be children. Mighty eaters and drinkers, good fare only loosed their tongues. Mr Lammas heard tales which he knew would haunt his dreams. When they forsook ale for whisky-toddy, brewed in great blue bowls of Dutch earthenware, the first songs began. He drank liquors new to him, in particular a brew of rum, burned and spiced, which ran in his veins like a pleasant fire. His precision was blown aside like summer mist; he joined lustily in the choruses; himself he sang 'Dunbarton's Drums' in his full tenor; his soul melted and expanded till he felt a kindness towards all humanity and a poet's glory in the richness of the world.

This high mood had accompanied his striding under the spring moon for three-quarters of his homeward journey. His fancy had been kindled by glimpses into marvels – marvels casually mentioned as common incidents of life. One man had sailed round the butt of Norway to Archangel, and on returning had been blocked for five days among icebergs. 'Like heidstanes in a kirkyaird,' he had said – 'I hae still the grue of them in my banes.' Another had gone into the Arctic among the great whales, and stammered a tale – he had some defect in his speech – of waters red like a battlefield, of creatures large as a hill rolling and sighing in their death-throes, and of blood rising in forty-foot spouts and drenching the decks like rain. Still

another, a little man with a mild face and a mouth full of texts, had been cast away on the Portugal coast, and had shipped in a Spanish boat and spent two years in the rotting creeks of the Main. 'God's wonders in the deep!' he had cried. 'Maybe, but it's the Deil's wonders in yon unco land,' and, being a little drunk, he had babbled of blood-sucking plants and evil beasts and men more evil. Poetry churned in Mr Lammas's head, and he strung phrases which ravished him . . . .

But the excitement was ebbing, and 'Dunbarton's Drums' was dying in his ears. He was almost across the King's Muir, and could see the first lights of St Andrews twinkling in the hollow. With an effort he pulled himself together. He was returning to duty, and must put away childish things.

Suddenly he was aware of a figure on his left. He saw it only as a deeper shadow in the darkness, but he heard its feet on the gravel of the track. A voice caused him to relax the grip which had tightened on his staff, for it was a voice he knew.

'You have the pace of me, sir.' The owner of the voice dropped into step.

Had there been light to see, the face of Mr Lammas would have been observed to fall into lines of professorial dignity.

'You walk late, Mr Kinloch,' he said.

'Like yourself, sir, and for the same cause. I, too, have been *in loco. . . . Dulce est desipere,* you know. Old Braxfield used to translate the line, "How blessed it is now and then to talk noansense"!'

'I do not follow.'

'I mean that I had the honour of supping in your company. sir. Of supping under your benediction. I am the latest recruit to the honourable company of the Free Fishers.'

Mr Lammas was startled. Here was his secret disclosed with a vengeance, for one of his own pupils shared it. His safety lay in the Fishers' Oath and also in the character of the participant. By the mercy of Providence this lad, Jock Kinloch, and he had always been on friendly terms. The only son of Lord Mannour, the judge whom he was trysted to meet on the morrow, he was

unlike the ordinary boys from the country manse, the burgh shop, or the plough-tail. Among the two hundred there was at the moment no 'primar', that is, a nobleman's son, and Jock ranked as one of the few 'secondars' or scions of the gentry. He was a stirring youth, often at odds with authority, and he had more than once been before the Rector and his assessors at the suit of an outraged St Andrews townsman. He was popular among his fellows, for he had money to spend and spent it jovially, his laugh was the loudest at the dismal students' table in St Leonards, on the links he smote a mighty ball, he was esteemed a bold rider with the Fife Hunt, and he donned the uniform of the Fencibles. No scholar and a sparing attendant at lectures, he had nevertheless revealed a certain predilection for the subjects which Mr Lammas professed, had won a prize for debate in the Logic class, and in Rhetoric had shown a gift for declamation and a high-coloured taste in English style. He had written poetry, too, galloping iambics in the fashionable mode, and excursions in the vernacular after the manner of Burns. Sometimes of an evening in the Professor's lodgings there would be a session of flamboyant literary talk, and once or twice Mr Lammas had been on the brink of unlocking his study drawer and disclosing his own pursuit of the Muses. For most of his pupils he had a kindliness, but for Jock Kinloch he felt something like affection.

'It is an old story with me,' he said primly. 'It goes back to my Dysart boyhood, when I was never away from the harbour-side. I have kept up the link out of sentiment, Mr Kinloch. As one grows older one is the more tenderly affectioned to the past.'

The young man laughed.

'You needn't apologize to me, sir. I honour you for this night's cantrip – maybe I had always a notion of something of the sort, for there must be that in you that keeps the blood young compared to the sapless kail-runts of the Senatus. I had thought it might be a woman.'

'You thought wrong,' was the icy answer. Mr Lammas was a little offended.

'Apparently I did, and I make you my apologies for a clumsy guess.' The boy's tone was respectful, but Mr Lammas knew that, could he see it, there was a twinkle in the black eyes. Jock Kinloch's eyes were dark as a gipsy's and full of audacious merriment.

'Maybe yon queer folk at Pittenweem,' he went on, 'brew a better elixir of youth than any woman. They were doubtless more circumspect at your end of the table, but at my end the tongues were slack and I got some wild tales. It would have done the douce St Andrews folk a world of good to sit down at yon board and hear the great Professor ask the blessing. . . . But no, no,' he added, as if conscious of some mute protest from his companion, 'they'll never hear a word of it from me. There's the Fishers' Oath between us. You'll be Professor Anthony Lammas as before, the man that keeps the Senatus in order and guides my erring steps in the paths of logic and good taste, and Nanty Lammas will be left among the partans and haddies and tarpots of Pittenweem.'

'I am obliged to you, Mr Kinloch. As you say, the oath is between us, and the Free Fishers sup always under the rose.'

The boy edged closer to his companion. The lights of the town were growing near – few in number, for the hour was late. He laid a hand upon Mr Lammas's arm.

'There's more in the oath than secrecy, sir,' he said; 'there's a promise of mutual aid. I took pains to make up on you, for I wanted to ask a favour from you as from a brother in the mystery. I want information, and maybe I want advice. Will you give it me?'

'Speak on.' Mr Lammas, his mind at ease, was well disposed to this garrulous youth.

'It's just this. When you finished college you were tutor in my Lord Snowdoun's family? You were the governor of his eldest son and prepared him for Oxford? Am I right, sir?'

'I was governor to the young Lord Belses, and for two years lived in his lordship's company.'

'Well, I'd like to know what kind of a fellow he is. I don't want to hear about a brilliant and promising young nobleman

– born to a great estate – a worthy successor of his father – bilge-pipe stuff like that. I want a judgement of him from an honest man, whose hand must have often itched for his ears.'

'I assure you it never did. There was much in Harry I did not understand, but there was little to offend me. He was a most hopeful scholar, with taste and knowledge beyond his years. He was an adept at sports in which I could not share. His manners were remarkable for their urbanity and in person he was altogether pleasing.'

'In short, a damned pompous popinjay!'

'I said nothing of the kind, and let me tell you that it ill-becomes you, Mr Kinloch, to speak thus of one of whom you can know nothing. Have you become a Jacobin to rave against rank? Have you ever seen the young lord?'

'Ay, I have seen him twice.' The boy spoke moodily. 'Once he came out with the Hunt. He was the best mounted of the lot of us, and I won't deny he can ride. At first I took the fences side by side with him, but my old Wattie Wud-spurs was no match for his blood beast, and I was thrown out before the kill. He spoke to me, and he was so cursed patronizing I could have throttled him. Minced his words like an affected school-miss.'

'I see in that no cause for offence.'

'No, but the second time he gave me cause – weighty cause, by God. It was at Mount Mordun, at the Hogmanay ball, and he came with Kirsty Evandale's party. Kirsty was to be my partner in the first eightsome, and she jilted me, by gad – looked through me when I went to claim her – and danced all night with that rotten lordling.'

'Your grievance seems to lie rather against Miss Christian Evandale.'

'No – she was beguiled – women are weak things. There were the rest of us – country bumpkins compared to this spruce dandy, with the waist of a girl and the steps of a dancing-master. There was me – not a word to say for myself – boiling with

passion and blushing and fuming – and all the time as gawky as a gander. . . . You say there has never been a woman in your life. Well, there's one in mine – Kirsty. I'm so crazily in love with her that she obscures daylight for me. They tell me that the Snowdouns want to make a match of it with Belses, for they are none too well off for grandees, and Kirsty will own half the land between Ore and Eden. . . . Now here is what I want to know. What about the popinjay? Is he scent and cambric and gold chains and silk waistcoats and nothing more, or is there a man behind the millinery? For if there's a man, I'm determined to come to grips with him.'

The two were now under the shadow of the ruined tower of St Regulus, and their feet were on the southward cobbles of the little city.

'Dear me, you are very peremptory,' said Mr Lammas. 'You summon me like an advocate with an unfriendly witness.'

'I summon you by the Fishers' Oath,' said the boy. 'I know that what you say will be honest and true.'

'I am obliged, and I will answer you, but my knowledge stops short five years back. When I knew Harry he was immature – there was no question of a man – he was only boy and dreamer. But I can bear witness to a warm heart, a just mind, and a high spirit. He may end as a fantastic, but not as a fop or a fool. He made something of a name at Christ Church, I understand, has travelled much in Europe, and has now entered Parliament. I have heard rumour of some extravagance in his political views, but I have heard no charge against his character. Your picture does not fit in with my recollection, Mr Kinloch, and you will do well to revise it. A dainty dress and deportment do not necessarily imply effeminacy, just as rudeness is no proof of courage.'

'You think he will fight, then?'

'Fight? What is this talk of fighting?'

'Simply that if he is going to cast his glamour over Kirsty, I'll have him out by hook or by crook. I'm so damnably in love with her that I'll stick at nothing.'

'You are a foolish child. If I did my duty I would report you to—'

'The Fishers' Oath! Remember the Fishers' Oath – Nanty Lammas!' He darted down a side street without further word, as the clock on the town-kirk steeple struck the hour of twelve.