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Opening Extract from...

Mr Standfast

Written by John Buchan

Introduction by Hew Strachan

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Introduction

The First World War enabled John Buchan to find his voice. Before 1914 he had tried his hand at colonial government, the law, publishing, journalism and parliament. After the war he was a household name: he was returned to parliament and on his appointment as governor-general of Canada was elevated to the peerage as Lord Tweedsmuir. The war's effect on his writing was even more marked than its consequences for his career. The mannered prose and fantasy worlds of his early fiction gave way to direct language and more realistic scenarios. To be sure, the book that most obviously marks that change of step, *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, a spy story published in 1915 and still the most widely read of all Buchan's 'shockers', had pre-war roots. Two of his early novels, *The Half-Hearted* (1900) and *The Power-House* (1913), anticipated its themes, but they required their heroes to deal with what were for his readers threats, not actuality. The success of *The Thirty-Nine Steps* rested in part on exactly that switch. It is set in pre-war Britain, and the population is unaware of the danger in its midst which Buchan's best known hero, Richard Hannay, battles to expose. By 1915 the British public could take a vicarious pleasure in recognising how blind they had been, as British soldiers fought and died on the Western front.

Buchan was not fit enough to join them. Here was the incentive to align his fiction with his commitment to public life. Buchan's most important war work was *Nelson's History of the War*, a massive undertaking which he began in 1914 and which ultimately stretched to twenty-four volumes and over one million words. Its narrative of the actual events of the war

as they unfolded provided the backcloth to Richard Hannay's fictional adventures. *Nelson's History* probably found its way into as many households as Hannay did; it also shaped positive perceptions of Britain's role in the war among neutral states abroad, not least in the United States. So important was this work to Britain's propaganda effort that Buchan was permitted to continue writing it when he was employed by the Foreign Office in 1915 and even when he went to France as a press officer in the Directorate of Military Intelligence at Douglas Haig's General Headquarters in 1916 (the year in which Richard Hannay's next adventure, *Greenmantle*, was also published). In 1917 Buchan was appointed director of the Department of Information, and in February 1918, when the department was converted into a fully-fledged Ministry of Information, he became its director of intelligence. It was during this period that Buchan, as well as maintaining the production of *Nelson's History*, also crafted the next Hannay story, *Mr Standfast*.

Even more than *Greenmantle*, *Mr Standfast* deals with some central issues in our understanding of the First World War. It could be argued (indeed I would argue) that it belongs in the canon of war novels as surely as do Henri Barbusse's *Under Fire* (1916) or Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1928). Each is a very different novel, and more divides Buchan from the other two than divides Barbusse from Remarque. But all three use fiction to illuminate the experience of the war and its emotional charge for those who lived through it. The conflict would find its echoes in almost all Buchan's post-war fiction, but in *Mr Standfast* it is centre stage. Written between July 1917 and July 1918, although not published until May 1919, the book was created at almost exactly the same time as the military events which shape its narrative flow: the successful seizure of the Messines ridge in a limited attack on 7 June 1917, the full-scale offensive which began at Ypres on 31 July and then petered out in the mud of Passchendaele in November, and the German offensive of 21 March 1918 and the desperate defensive battles which followed.

Only the last are the subject of sustained attention in *Mr Standfast*, but military operations are not centre stage in the novel. That is occupied by the home front, not the battle front. On the north-west coast of Scotland, Hannay suffers from the controls and checks introduced under the Defence of the Realm Act, with its curbing of domestic civil liberties; in north Yorkshire he finds himself caught up in the making of a war film, presumably intended for propaganda purposes; and in London he spots his arch-enemy in the middle of an air raid. The war is in Britain as much as anywhere else.

Buchan's concern in 1917–18, both professionally and personally, was whether Britain would fall victim to the war weariness which had precipitated Russia into revolution, and which he was sure Germany would exploit – not least through what was believed to be a still active network of spies. After all, and Buchan may have known this, Britain was doing much the same in Germany: it was channelling funds through Switzerland to support German socialism so as to undermine the Imperial government from within. German socialists, however patriotic they were, were the unwitting dupes of the Reich's enemy. *Mr Standfast*'s great strength is its exploration of exactly that possibility within Britain. Those who campaigned for peace might seem to be on the side of the angels but could actually be on the side of Germany; those who were socialists could well be patriots seeking national unity in adversity. *Mr Standfast* is a thinking man's response to the sort of rabid nationalism which could only alienate those of the left or of a pacifist persuasion, whom Buchan, as a responsible and mature propagandist, was anxious to woo; the book seeks to unite left and right, pacifist and belligerent, in a common morality by splitting those who are patriots from those who are in effect doing Germany's work for it.

Hannay goes to two locations where he explores these differences. The first is the garden town of Biggleswick, home to the sort of pacifism that makes his blood boil. Here he meets Launcelot Wake, who opposes the war but is no friend to Germany, who lives out the difference between

conscientious objection to military service and subordination to false hopes of international reconciliation, and who at the last is both pacifist and patriot. The second is Glasgow, the city of Buchan's childhood, where he had gone to school and university. According to the press, the incidence of strikes on Clydeside had made the trades unions of heavy industry into the war profiteers of the working class: in the demonology of the day they were using the needs of war production to line the pockets of the workers while others risked life and limb at the front. Hannay discovers that the workers' dominant feeling is hostility for Germany, and he finds an ally in Andrew Amos. Amos is a shop steward, a representative of the unofficial trades union movement which had caused so much trouble for both employers and government. By portraying Amos not as a socialist but an old Gladstonian Liberal, versed in the writings of J.S. Mill, Buchan is able to turn an anti-hero into a hero; it probably helps that Amos (like Buchan's maternal family) is a Borderer, from Galashiels, rather than a true Glaswegian.

Buchan's theme therefore is national unity, and the need to recognise and value the different approaches which discordant political traditions can bring to its maintenance and to the achievement of victory. Indeed this is what Britain is fighting for: he praises the Labour movement for preventing the big man from exploiting the small, and he stresses that the police are protecting the right to free speech, not preventing it. But *Mr Standfast* is also a personal journey, through his own war weariness and self-doubt. It is a book firmly rooted in the Protestant and Presbyterian tradition in which Buchan, a son of the manse, had been raised. It is perhaps significant that the Glasgow workers, no doubt reflecting the sectarian prejudices imbibed by Buchan in his youth, blame the Irish for the trouble on Clydeside. Buchan's target is Ireland's opposition to conscription, but it is legitimate, in a book which takes its title and its tropes from John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, to ask whether it is also Catholicism. By 1917 many of Buchan's close friends had been killed, among them Raymond Asquith,

the prime minister's son, and Tommy Nelson, Scottish rugby internationalist and the publisher of Buchan's history of the war. The soldiers who set on Hannay in Glasgow when he is posing as an opponent of the war are from the Royal Scots Fusiliers, and it is one of them who later becomes Hannay's stalwart supporter in the novel. This was the regiment in which Buchan's younger brother, Alastair, served and with whom he had lost his life only a short while before, at the battle of Arras in April 1917.

Mr Standfast is therefore a search for meaning in such loss. Its heroes are fictional but the book is peopled with real examples. Another of Buchan's friends, Auberon Herbert, Lord Lucas, had lost a leg in the South African War, but nonetheless joined the Royal Flying Corps in the First World War and was killed over the Somme in November 1916. Here is the inspiration for the fictional Peter Pienaar, the Boer big game-hunter, who comparably crippled finds meaning in his own death above the battlefield in 1918. By being killed in action, Pienaar, or Mr Standfast, earns redemption as surely as does Launcelot Wake.

And what of those who survive, who are left behind, as Buchan was? They have a task too, to give meaning to life on earth. *Mr Standfast* hints as to how Buchan's own course had been changed by the war. At a personal level, alongside the copious acknowledgements of his Scottish roots, there is a new theme: a love of England (and not just England in the sense used by Unionists of his generation, as a substitute for Britain). As the novel opens, Hannay, the South African, hymns the delights of rural Oxfordshire, of a landscape more tamed, more productive and more calm than the settings of Buchan's own youth. The implication is that this is something for which it is worth fighting, and it was here after the war that Buchan would settle, at Elsfield, near Oxford and on the edge of the Cotswolds. In embracing a rural idyll, Buchan cannot be accused of rejecting urban realities (after all, Glaswegians play important parts in Hannay's triumph) or denying the contribution of the British empire as a whole.

Here too, however, there are the seeds of adaptation. Before the war, Buchan, as a former member of Lord Milner's 'kindergarten' in South Africa, was committed to the ideals of imperial federation, not least as an agent of world order and peaceful international relations through the promotion of a common culture and legal system. By 1917 Britain could not sustain the allied war effort on its own; it was reliant on the United States, and after the war Anglo-American understanding would be the building block of this new order and the League of Nations its institutional expression. Much of Buchan's wartime writing was directed at an American readership, and in *Greenmantle* he introduced John Scantlebury Blenkiron as the somewhat overweight embodiment of these ideas. Blenkiron, like Buchan himself, suffers from a duodenal ulcer, and, also like Buchan, he is not loth in *Mr Standfast* to tell his British readers that the war has changed the world and that they must come to understand the Americans, just as the Americans must come to understand England.

Mr Standfast reflects the big issues of its day, but it is a spy story (and, it has to be said, a rather less successful love story), written by a master of the genre. It is to be enjoyed as such. But the big questions of its day deepen and enrich the text, giving it an emotional weight alongside its undoubted pace and masterful narrative.

Hew Strachan
Oxford

ONE

The Wicket-Gate

I spent one-third of my journey looking out of the window of a first-class carriage, the next in a local motor-car following the course of a trout stream in a shallow valley, and the last tramping over a ridge of down and through great beech-woods to my quarters for the night. In the first part I was in an infamous temper; in the second I was worried and mystified; but the cool twilight of the third stage calmed and heartened me, and I reached the gates of Fosse Manor with a mighty appetite and a quiet mind.

As we slipped up the Thames valley on the smooth Great Western line I had reflected ruefully on the thorns in the path of duty. For more than a year I had never been out of khaki, except the months I spent in hospital. They gave me my battalion before the Somme, and I came out of that weary battle after the first big September fighting with a crack in my head and a D.S.O. I had received a C.B. for the Erzerum business, so what with these and my Matabele and South African medals and the Legion of Honour, I had a chest like the High Priest's breastplate. I rejoined in January, and got a brigade on the eve of Arras. There we had a star turn, and took about as many prisoners as we put infantry over the top. After that we were hauled out for a month, and subsequently planted in a bad bit on the Scarpe with a hint that we would soon be used for a big push. Then suddenly I was ordered home to report to the War Office, and passed on by them to Bullivant and his merry men. So here I was sitting in a railway carriage in a grey tweed suit, with a neat new suitcase on the rack labelled C.B. The initials stood for Cornelius Brand, for that was my name now. And an

old boy in the corner was asking me questions and wondering audibly why I wasn't fighting, while a young blood of a second lieutenant with a wound stripe was eyeing me with scorn.

The old chap was one of the cross-examining type, and after he had borrowed my matches he set to work to find out all about me. He was a tremendous fire-eater, and a bit of a pessimist about our slow progress in the west. I told him I came from South Africa and was a mining engineer.

'Been fighting with Botha?' he asked.

'No,' I said. 'I'm not the fighting kind.'

The second lieutenant screwed up his nose.

'Is there no conscription in South Africa?'

'Thank God there isn't,' I said, and the old fellow begged permission to tell me a lot of unpalatable things. I knew his kind and didn't give much for it. He was the sort who, if he had been under fifty, would have crawled on his belly to his tribunal to get exempted, but being over age was able to pose as a patriot. But I didn't like the second lieutenant's grin, for he seemed a good class of lad. I looked steadily out of the window for the rest of the way, and wasn't sorry when I got to my station.

I had had the queerest interview with Bullivant and Macgillivray. They asked me first if I was willing to serve again in the old game, and I said I was. I felt as bitter as sin, for I had got fixed in the military groove, and had made good there. Here was I – a brigadier and still under forty, and with another year of the war there was no saying where I might end. I had started out without any ambition, only a great wish to see the business finished. But now I had acquired a professional interest in the thing, I had a nailing good brigade, and I had got the hang of our new kind of war as well as any fellow from Sandhurst and Camberley. They were asking me to scrap all I had learned and start again in a new job. I had to agree, for discipline's discipline, but I could have knocked their heads together in my vexation.

What was worse they wouldn't, or couldn't, tell me anything about what they wanted me for. It was the old game of running me in blinkers. They asked me to take it on trust and put myself

unreservedly in their hands. I would get my instructions later, they said.

I asked if it was important.

Bullivant narrowed his eyes. 'If it weren't, do you suppose we could have wrung an active brigadier out of the War Office? As it was, it was like drawing teeth.'

'Is it risky?' was my next question.

'In the long run – damnably,' was the answer.

'And you can't tell me anything more?'

'Nothing as yet. You'll get your instructions soon enough. You know both of us, Hannay, and you know we wouldn't waste the time of a good man on folly. We are going to ask you for something which will make a big call on your patriotism. It will be a difficult and arduous task, and it may be a very grim one before you get to the end of it, but we believe you can do it, and that no one else can . . . You know us pretty well. Will you let us judge for you?'

I looked at Bullivant's shrewd, kind old face and Macgillivray's steady eyes. These men were my friends and wouldn't play with me.

'All right,' I said. 'I'm willing. What's the first step?'

'Get out of uniform and forget you ever were a soldier. Change your name. Your old one, Cornelis Brandt, will do, but you'd better spell it "Brand" this time. Remember that you are an engineer just back from South Africa, and that you don't care a rush about the war. You can't understand what all the fools are fighting about, and you think we might have peace at once by a little friendly business talk. You needn't be pro-German – if you like you can be rather severe on the Hun. But you must be in deadly earnest about a speedy peace.'

I expect the corners of my mouth fell, for Bullivant burst out laughing.

'Hang it all, man, it's not so difficult. I feel sometimes inclined to argue that way myself, when my dinner doesn't agree with me. It's not so hard as to wander round the Fatherland abusing Britain, which was your last job.'

'I'm ready,' I said. 'But I want to do one errand on my own first. I must see a fellow in my brigade who is in a shell-shock hospital in the Cotswolds. Isham's the name of the place.'

The two men exchanged glances. 'This looks like fate,' said Bullivant. 'By all means go to Isham. The place where your work begins is only a couple of miles off. I want you to spend next Thursday night as the guest of two maiden ladies called Wymondham at Fosse Manor. You will go down there as a lone South African visiting a sick friend. They are hospitable souls and entertain many angels unawares.'

'And I get my orders there?'

'You get your orders, and you are under bond to obey them . . .' And Bullivant and Macgillivray smiled at each other.

I was thinking hard about that odd conversation as the small Ford car, which I had wired for to the inn, carried me away from the suburbs of the county town into a land of rolling hills and green water-meadows. It was a gorgeous afternoon and the blossom of early June was on every tree. But I had no eyes for landscape and the summer, being engaged in reprobating Bullivant and cursing my fantastic fate. I detested my new part and looked forward to naked shame. It was bad enough for anyone to have to pose as a pacifist, but for me, strong as a bull and as sunburnt as a gipsy and not looking my forty years, it was a black disgrace. To go into Germany as an anti-British Afrikander was a stoutish adventure, but to lounge about at home talking rot was a very different-sized job. My stomach rose at the thought of it, and I had pretty well decided to wire to Bullivant and cry off. There are some things that no one has a right to ask of any white man.

When I got to Isham and found poor old Blaikie I didn't feel happier. He had been a friend of mine in Rhodesia, and after the German South-West affair was over had come home to a Fusilier battalion, which was in my brigade at Arras. He had been buried by a big crump just before we got our second objective, and was dug out without a scratch on him, but as daft as a hatter. I had heard he was mending, and had promised his

family to look him up the first chance I got. I found him sitting on a garden seat, staring steadily before him like a lookout at sea. He knew me all right and cheered up for a second, but very soon he was back at his staring, and every word he uttered was like the careful speech of a drunken man. A bird flew out of a bush, and I could see him holding himself tight to keep from screaming. The best I could do was to put a hand on his shoulder and stroke him as one strokes a frightened horse. The sight of the price my old friend had paid didn't put me in love with pacificism.

We talked of brother officers and South Africa, for I wanted to keep his thoughts off the war, but he kept edging round to it. 'How long will the damned thing last?' he asked.

'Oh, it's practically over,' I lied cheerfully. 'No more fighting for you and precious little for me. The Boche is done in all right . . . What you've got to do, my lad, is to sleep fourteen hours in the twenty-four and spend half the rest catching trout. We'll have a shot at the grouse-bird together this autumn and we'll get some of the old gang to join us.'

Someone put a tea-tray on the table beside us, and I looked up to see the very prettiest girl I ever set eyes on. She seemed little more than a child, and before the war would probably have still ranked as a flapper. She wore the neat blue dress and apron of a V.A.D. and her white cap was set on hair like spun gold. She smiled demurely as she arranged the tea-things, and I thought I had never seen eyes at once so merry and so grave. I stared after her as she walked across the lawn, and I remember noticing that she moved with the free grace of an athletic boy.

'Who on earth's that?' I asked Blaikie.

'That? Oh, one of the sisters,' he said listlessly. 'There are squads of them. I can't tell one from another.'

Nothing gave me such an impression of my friend's sickness as the fact that he should have no interest in something so fresh and jolly as that girl. Presently my time was up and I had to go, and as I looked back I saw him sunk in his chair again, his eyes fixed on vacancy, and his hands gripping his knees.

The thought of him depressed me horribly. Here was I condemned to some rotten buffoonery in inglorious safety, while the salt of the earth like Blaikie was paying the ghastliest price. From him my thoughts flew to old Peter Pienaar, and I sat down on a roadside wall and read his last letter. It nearly made me howl.

Peter, you must know, had shaved his beard and joined the Royal Flying Corps the summer before when we got back from the Greenmantle affair. That was the only kind of reward he wanted, and, though he was absurdly over age, the authorities allowed it. They were wise not to stickle about rules, for Peter's eyesight and nerve were as good as those of any boy of twenty. I knew he would do well, but I was not prepared for his immediately blazing success. He got his pilot's certificate in record time and went out to France; and presently even we foot-sloggers, busy shifting ground before the Somme, began to hear rumours of his doings. He developed a perfect genius for air-fighting. There were plenty better trick-flyers, and plenty who knew more about the science of the game, but there was no one with quite Peter's genius for an actual scrap. He was as full of dodges a couple of miles up in the sky as he had been among the rocks of the Berg. He apparently knew how to hide in the empty air as cleverly as in the long grass of the Lebombo Flats. Amazing yarns began to circulate among the infantry about this new airman, who could take cover below one plane of an enemy squadron while all the rest were looking for him. I remember talking about him with the South Africans when we were out resting next door to them after the bloody Delville Wood business. The day before we had seen a good battle in the clouds when the Boche plane had crashed, and a Transvaal machine-gun officer brought the report that the British airman had been Pienaar. 'Well done, the old *takhaar*!' he cried, and started to yarn about Peter's methods. It appeared that Peter had a theory that every man has a blind spot, and that he knew just how to find that blind spot in the world of air. The best cover, he maintained, was not in cloud or a wisp of fog, but in

the unseeing patch in the eye of your enemy. I recognized that talk for the real thing. It was on a par with Peter's doctrine of 'atmosphere' and 'the double bluff' and all the other principles that his queer old mind had cogitated out of his rackety life.

By the end of August that year Peter's was about the best-known figure in the Flying Corps. If the reports had mentioned names he would have been a national hero, but he was only 'Lieutenant Blank', and the newspapers, which expatiated on his deeds, had to praise the Service and not the man. That was right enough, for half the magic of our Flying Corps was its freedom from advertisement. But the British Army knew all about him, and the men in the trenches used to discuss him as if he were a crack football-player. There was a very big German airman called Lensch, one of the Albatross heroes, who about the end of August claimed to have destroyed thirty-two Allied machines. Peter had then only seventeen planes to his credit, but he was rapidly increasing his score. Lensch was a mighty man of valour and a good sportsman after his fashion. He was amazingly quick at manoeuvring his machine in the actual fight, but Peter was supposed to be better at forcing the kind of fight he wanted. Lensch, if you like, was the tactician and Peter the strategist. Anyhow the two were out to get each other. There were plenty of fellows who saw the campaign as a struggle not between Hun and Briton, but between Lensch and Pienaar.

The 15th September came, and I got knocked out and went to hospital. When I was fit to read the papers again and receive letters, I found to my consternation that Peter had been downed. It happened at the end of October when the south-west gales badly handicapped our airwork. When our bombing or reconnaissance jobs behind the enemy lines were completed, instead of being able to glide back into safety, we had to fight our way home slowly against a head-wind exposed to Archies and Hun planes. Somewhere east of Bapaume on a return journey Peter fell in with Lensch – at least the German Press gave Lensch the credit. His petrol tank was shot to bits and he was forced to descend in a wood near Morchies. 'The

celebrated British airman, Pinner', in the words of the German communiqué, was made prisoner.

I had no letter from him till the beginning of the New Year, when I was preparing to return to France. It was a very contented letter. He seemed to have been fairly well treated, though he had always a low standard of what he expected from the world in the way of comfort. I inferred that his captors had not identified in the brilliant airman the Dutch miscreant who a year before had broken out of a German jail. He had discovered the pleasures of reading and had perfected himself in an art which he had once practised indifferently. Somehow or other he had got a *Pilgrim's Progress*, from which he seemed to extract enormous pleasure. And then at the end, quite casually, he mentioned that he had been badly wounded and that his left leg would never be much use again.

After that I got frequent letters, and I wrote to him every week and sent him every kind of parcel I could think of. His letters used to make me both ashamed and happy. I had always banked on old Peter, and here he was behaving like an early Christian martyr – never a word of complaint, and just as cheery as if it were a winter morning on the high veld and we were off to ride down springbok. I knew what the loss of a leg must mean to him, for bodily fitness had always been his pride. The rest of life must have unrolled itself before him very drab and dusty to the grave. But he wrote as if he were on the top of his form and kept commiserating me on the discomforts of my job. The picture of that patient, gentle old fellow, hobbling about his compound and puzzling over his *Pilgrim's Progress*, a cripple for life after five months of blazing glory, would have stiffened the back of a jellyfish.

This last letter was horribly touching, for summer had come and the smell of the woods behind his prison reminded Peter of a place in the Woodbush, and one could read in every sentence the ache of exile. I sat on that stone wall and considered how trifling were the crumpled leaves in my bed of life compared with the thorns Peter and Blaikie had to lie on. I thought of

Sandy far off in Mesopotamia, and old Blenkiron groaning with dyspepsia somewhere in America, and I considered that they were the kind of fellows who did their jobs without complaining. The result was that when I got up to go on I had recovered a manlier temper. I wasn't going to shame my friends or pick and choose my duty. I would trust myself to Providence, for, as Blenkiron used to say, Providence was all right if you gave him a chance.

It was not only Peter's letter that steadied and calmed me. Isham stood high up in a fold of the hills away from the main valley, and the road I was taking brought me over the ridge and back to the stream-side. I climbed through great beechwoods, which seemed in the twilight like some green place far below the sea, and then over a short stretch of hill pasture to the rim of the vale. All about me were little fields enclosed with walls of grey stone and full of dim sheep. Below were dusky woods around what I took to be Fosse Manor, for the great Roman Fosse Way, straight as an arrow, passed over the hills to the south and skirted its grounds. I could see the stream slipping among its water-meadows and could hear the plash of the weir. A tiny village settled in a crook of the hill, and its church-tower sounded seven with a curiously sweet chime. Otherwise there was no noise but the twitter of small birds and the night wind in the tops of the beeches.

In that moment I had a kind of revelation. I had a vision of what I had been fighting for, what we all were fighting for. It was peace, deep and holy and ancient, peace older than the oldest wars, peace which would endure when all our swords were hammered into ploughshares. It was more; for in that hour England first took hold of me. Before my country had been South Africa, and when I thought of home it had been the wide sun-steeped spaces of the veld or some scented glen of the Berg. But now I realized that I had a new home. I understood what a precious thing this little England was, how old and kindly and comforting, how wholly worth striving for. The freedom of an acre of her soil was cheaply bought by the blood of the best of

us. I knew what it meant to be a poet, though for the life of me I could not have made a line of verse. For in that hour I had a prospect as if from a hilltop which made all the present troubles of the road seem of no account. I saw not only victory after war, but a new and happier world after victory, when I should inherit something of this English peace and wrap myself in it till the end of my days.

Very humbly and quietly, like a man walking through a cathedral, I went down the hill to the Manor lodge, and came to a door in an old red-brick façade, smothered in magnolias which smelt like hot lemons in the June dusk. The car from the inn had brought on my baggage, and presently I was dressing in a room which looked out on a water-garden. For the first time for more than a year I put on a starched shirt and a dinner-jacket, and as I dressed I could have sung from pure light-heartedness. I was in for some arduous job, and sometime that evening in that place I should get my marching orders. Someone would arrive – perhaps Bullivant – and read me the riddle. But whatever it was, I was ready for it, for my whole being had found a new purpose. Living in the trenches, you are apt to get your horizon narrowed down to the front line of enemy barbed wire on one side and the nearest rest billets on the other. But now I seemed to see beyond the fog to a happy country.

High-pitched voices greeted my ears as I came down the broad staircase, voices which scarcely accorded with the panelled walls and the austere family portraits; and when I found my hostesses in the hall I thought their looks still less in keeping with the house. Both ladies were on the wrong side of forty, but their dress was that of young girls. Miss Doria Wymondham was tall and thin with a mass of nondescript pale hair confined by a black velvet fillet. Miss Claire Wymondham was shorter and plumper and had done her best by ill-applied cosmetics to make herself look like a foreign *demi-mondaine*. They greeted me with the friendly casualness which I had long ago discovered was the right English manner towards your guests; as if they had

just strolled in and billeted themselves, and you were quite glad to see them but mustn't be asked to trouble yourself further. The next second they were cooing like pigeons round a picture which a young man was holding up in the lamplight.

He was a tallish, lean fellow of round about thirty years, wearing grey flannels and shoes dusty from the country roads. His thin face was sallow as if from living indoors, and he had rather more hair on his head than most of us. In the glow of the lamp his features were very clear, and I examined them with interest, for, remember, I was expecting a stranger to give me orders. He had a long, rather strong chin and an obstinate mouth with peevish lines about its corners. But the remarkable feature was his eyes. I can best describe them by saying that they looked *hot* – not fierce or angry, but so restless that they seemed to ache physically and to want sponging with cold water.

They finished their talk about the picture – which was couched in a jargon of which I did not understand one word – and Miss Doria turned to me and the young man.

'My cousin Launcelot Wake – Mr Brand . . .'

We nodded stiffly and Mr Wake's hand went up to smooth his hair in a self-conscious gesture.

'Has Barnard announced dinner? By the way, where is Mary?'

'She came in five minutes ago and I sent her to change,' said Miss Claire. 'I won't have her spoiling the evening with that horrid uniform. She may masquerade as she likes out-of-doors, but this house is for civilized people.'

The butler appeared and mumbled something. 'Come along,' cried Miss Doria, 'for I'm sure you are starving, Mr Brand. And Launcelot has bicycled ten miles.'

The dining-room was very unlike the hall. The panelling had been stripped off, and the walls and ceiling were covered with a dead-black satiny paper on which hung the most monstrous pictures in large dull-gold frames. I could only see them dimly, but they seemed to be a mere riot of ugly colour. The young man nodded towards them. 'I see you have got the Dégousses hung at last,' he said.

'How exquisite they are!' cried Miss Claire. 'How subtle and candid and brave! Doria and I warm our souls at their flame.'

Some aromatic wood had been burned in the room, and there was a queer sickly scent about. Everything in that place was strained and uneasy and abnormal – the candle shades on the table, the mass of faked china fruit in the centre dish, the gaudy hangings and the nightmarish walls. But the food was magnificent. It was the best dinner I had eaten since 1914.

'Tell me, Mr Brand,' said Miss Doria, her long white face propped on a much-beringed hand. 'You are one of us? You are in revolt against this crazy war?'

'Why, yes,' I said, remembering my part. 'I think a little common-sense would settle it right away.'

'With a little common-sense it would never have started,' said Mr Wake.

'Launcelot's a C.O., you know,' said Miss Doria.

I did not know, for he did not look any kind of soldier . . . I was just about to ask him what he commanded, when I remembered that the letters stood also for 'Conscientious Objector', and stopped in time.

At that moment someone slipped into the vacant seat on my right hand. I turned and saw the V.A.D. girl who had brought tea to Blaikie that afternoon at the hospital.

'He was exempted by his Department,' the lady went on, 'for he's a Civil Servant, and so he never had a chance of testifying in court, but no one has done better work for our cause. He is on the committee of the L.D.A., and questions have been asked about him in Parliament.'

The man was not quite comfortable at this biography. He glanced nervously at me and was going to begin some kind of explanation, when Miss Doria cut him short. 'Remember our rule, Launcelot. No turgid war controversy within these walls.'

I agreed with her. The war had seemed closely knit to the summer landscape for all its peace, and to the noble old chambers of the Manor. But in that demented modish dining-room it was shriekingly incongruous.

Then they spoke of other things. Mostly of pictures or common friends, and a little of books. They paid no heed to me, which was fortunate, for I know nothing about these matters and didn't understand half the language. But once Miss Doria tried to bring me in. They were talking about some Russian novel – a name like *Leprous Souls* – and she asked me if I had read it. By a curious chance I had. It had drifted somehow into our dug-out on the Scarpe, and after we had all stuck in the second chapter it had disappeared in the mud to which it naturally belonged. The lady praised its 'poignancy' and 'grave beauty'. I assented and congratulated myself on my second escape – for if the question had been put to me I should have described it as God-forgotten twaddle.

I turned to the girl, who welcomed me with a smile. I had thought her pretty in her V.A.D. dress, but now, in a filmy black gown and with her hair no longer hidden by a cap, she was the most ravishing thing you ever saw. And I observed something else. There was more than good looks in her young face. Her broad, low brow and her laughing eyes were amazingly intelligent. She had an uncanny power of making her eyes go suddenly grave and deep, like a glittering river narrowing into a pool.

'We shall never be introduced,' she said, 'so let me reveal myself. I'm Mary Lamington and these are my aunts . . . Did you really like *Leprous Souls*?'

It was easy enough to talk to her. And oddly enough her mere presence took away the oppression I had felt in that room. For she belonged to the out-of-doors and to the old house and to the world at large. She belonged to the war, and to that happier world beyond it – a world which must be won by going through the struggle and not by shirking it, like those two silly ladies.

I could see Wake's eyes often on the girl, while he boomed and oraculated and the Misses Wymondham prattled. Presently the conversation seemed to leave the flowery paths of art and to verge perilously near forbidden topics. He began to abuse our generals in the field. I could not choose but listen. Miss

Lamington's brows were slightly bent, as if in disapproval, and my own temper began to rise.

He had every kind of idiotic criticism – incompetence, faint-heartedness, corruption. Where he got the stuff I can't imagine, for the most grousing Tommy, with his leave stopped, never put together such balderdash. Worst of all he asked me to agree with him.

It took all my sense of discipline. 'I don't know much about the subject,' I said, 'but out in South Africa I did hear that the British leading was the weak point. I expect there's a good deal in what you say.'

It may have been fancy, but the girl at my side seemed to whisper, 'Well done!'

Wake and I did not remain long behind before joining the ladies; I purposely cut it short, for I was in mortal fear lest I should lose my temper and spoil everything. I stood up with my back against the mantelpiece for as long as a man may smoke a cigarette, and I let him yarn to me, while I looked steadily at his face. By this time I was very clear that Wake was not the fellow to give me my instructions. He wasn't playing a game. He was a perfectly honest crank, but not a fanatic, for he wasn't sure of himself. He had somehow lost his self-respect and was trying to argue himself back into it. He had considerable brains, for the reasons he gave for differing from most of his countrymen were good so far as they went. I shouldn't have cared to take him on in public argument. If you had told me about such a fellow a week before I should have been sick at the thought of him. But now I didn't dislike him. I was bored by him and I was also tremendously sorry for him. You could see he was as restless as a hen.

When we went back to the hall he announced that he must get on the road, and commandeered Miss Lamington to help him find his bicycle. It appeared he was staying at an inn a dozen miles off for a couple of days' fishing, and the news somehow made me like him better. Presently the ladies of the house departed to bed for their beauty sleep and I was left to my own devices.

For some time I sat smoking in the hall wondering when the messenger would arrive. It was getting late and there seemed to be no preparation in the house to receive anybody. The butler came in with a tray of drinks and I asked him if he expected another guest that night. 'I 'adn't 'eard of it, sir,' was his answer. 'There 'asn't been a telegram that I know of, and I 'ave received no instructions.'

I lit my pipe and sat for twenty minutes reading a weekly paper. Then I got up and looked at the family portraits. The moon coming through the lattice invited me out-of-doors as a cure for my anxiety. It was after eleven o'clock, and I was still without any knowledge of my next step. It is a maddening business to be screwed up for an unpleasant job and to have the wheels of the confounded thing tarry.

Outside the house beyond a flagged terrace the lawn fell away, white in the moonshine, to the edge of the stream, which here had expanded into a miniature lake. By the water's edge was a little formal garden with grey stone parapets which now gleamed like dusky marble. Great wafts of scent rose from it, for the lilacs were scarcely over and the may was in full blossom. Out from the shade of it came suddenly a voice like a nightingale.

It was singing the old song 'Cherry Ripe', a common enough thing which I had chiefly known from barrel-organs. But heard in the scented moonlight it seemed to hold all the lingering magic of an elder England and of this hallowed countryside. I stepped inside the garden bounds and saw the head of the girl Mary.

She was conscious of my presence, for she turned towards me.

'I was coming to look for you,' she said, 'now that the house is quiet. I have something to say to you, General Hannay.'

She knew my name and must be somehow in the business. The thought entranced me.

'Thank God I can speak to you freely,' I cried. 'Who and what are you – living in that house in that kind of company?'

'My good aunts!' She laughed softly. 'They talk a great deal about their souls, but they really mean their nerves. Why, they are what you call my camouflage, and a very good one too.'

'And that cadaverous young prig?'

'Poor Launcelot! Yes – camouflage too – perhaps something a little more. You must not judge him too harshly.'

'But . . . but—' I did not know how to put it, and stammered in my eagerness. 'How can I tell that you are the right person for me to speak to? You see I am under orders, and I have got none about you.'

'I will give you proof,' she said. 'Three days ago Sir Walter Bullivant and Mr Macgillivray told you to come here tonight and to wait here for further instructions. You met them in the little smoking-room at the back of the Rota Club. You were bidden take the name of Cornelius Brand, and turn yourself from a successful general into a pacifist South African engineer. Is that correct?'

'Perfectly.'

'You have been restless all evening looking for the messenger to give you these instructions. Set your mind at ease. No messenger is coming. You will get your orders from me.'

'I could not take them from a more welcome source,' I said.

'Very prettily put. If you want further credentials I can tell you much about your own doings in the past three years. I can explain to you, who don't need the explanation, every step in the business of the Black Stone. I think I could draw a pretty accurate map of your journey to Erzerum. You have a letter from Peter Pienaar in your pocket – I can tell you its contents. Are you willing to trust me?'

'With all my heart,' I said.

'Good. Then my first order will try you pretty hard. For I have no orders to give you except to bid you go and steep yourself in a particular kind of life. Your first duty is to get "atmosphere", as your friend Peter used to say. Oh, I will tell you where to go and how to behave. But I can't bid you *do* anything, only live idly with open eyes and ears till you have got the "feel" of the situation.'

She stopped and laid a hand on my arm.

'It won't be easy. It would madden me, and it will be a far heavier burden for a man like you. You have got to sink down deep into the life of the half-baked, the people whom this war hasn't touched or has touched in the wrong way, the people who split hairs all day and are engrossed in what you and I would call selfish little fads. Yes. People like my aunts and Launcelot, only for the most part in a different social grade. You won't live in an old manor like this, but among gimcrack little "arty" houses. You will hear everything you regard as sacred laughed at and condemned, and every kind of nauseous folly acclaimed, and you must hold your tongue and pretend to agree. You will have nothing in the world to do except to let the life soak into you, and, as I have said, keep your eyes and ears open.'

'But you must give me some clue as to what I should be looking for?'

'My orders are to give you none. Our chiefs – yours and mine – want you to go where you are going without any kind of *parti pris*. Remember we are still in the intelligence stage of the affair. The time hasn't yet come for a plan of campaign, and still less for action.'

'Tell me one thing,' I said. 'Is it a really big thing we're after?'

'A – really – big – thing,' she said slowly and very gravely. 'You and I and some hundred others are hunting the most dangerous man in all the world. Till we succeed everything that Britain does is crippled. If we fail or succeed too late the Allies may never win the victory which is their right. I will tell you one thing to cheer you. It is in some sort a race against time, so your purgatory won't endure too long.'

I was bound to obey, and she knew it, for she took my willingness for granted.

From a little gold satchel she selected a tiny box, and opening it extracted a thing like a purple wafer with a white St Andrew's Cross on it.

'What kind of watch have you? Ah, a hunter. Paste that inside the lid. Some day you may be called on to show it . . . One other

thing. Buy tomorrow a copy of the *Pilgrim's Progress* and get it by heart. You will receive letters and messages some day and the style of our friends is apt to be reminiscent of John Bunyan . . . The car will be at the door tomorrow to catch the ten-thirty, and I will give you the address of the rooms that have been taken for you . . . Beyond that I have nothing to say, except to beg you to play the part well and keep your temper. You behaved very nicely at dinner.'

I asked one last question as we said good night in the hall. 'Shall I see you again?'

'Soon, and often,' was the answer. 'Remember we are colleagues.'

I went upstairs feeling extraordinarily comforted. I had a perfectly beastly time ahead of me, but now it was all glorified and coloured with the thought of the girl who had sung 'Cherry Ripe' in the garden. I commended the wisdom of that old serpent Bullivant in the choice of his intermediary, for I'm hanged if I would have taken such orders from anyone else.