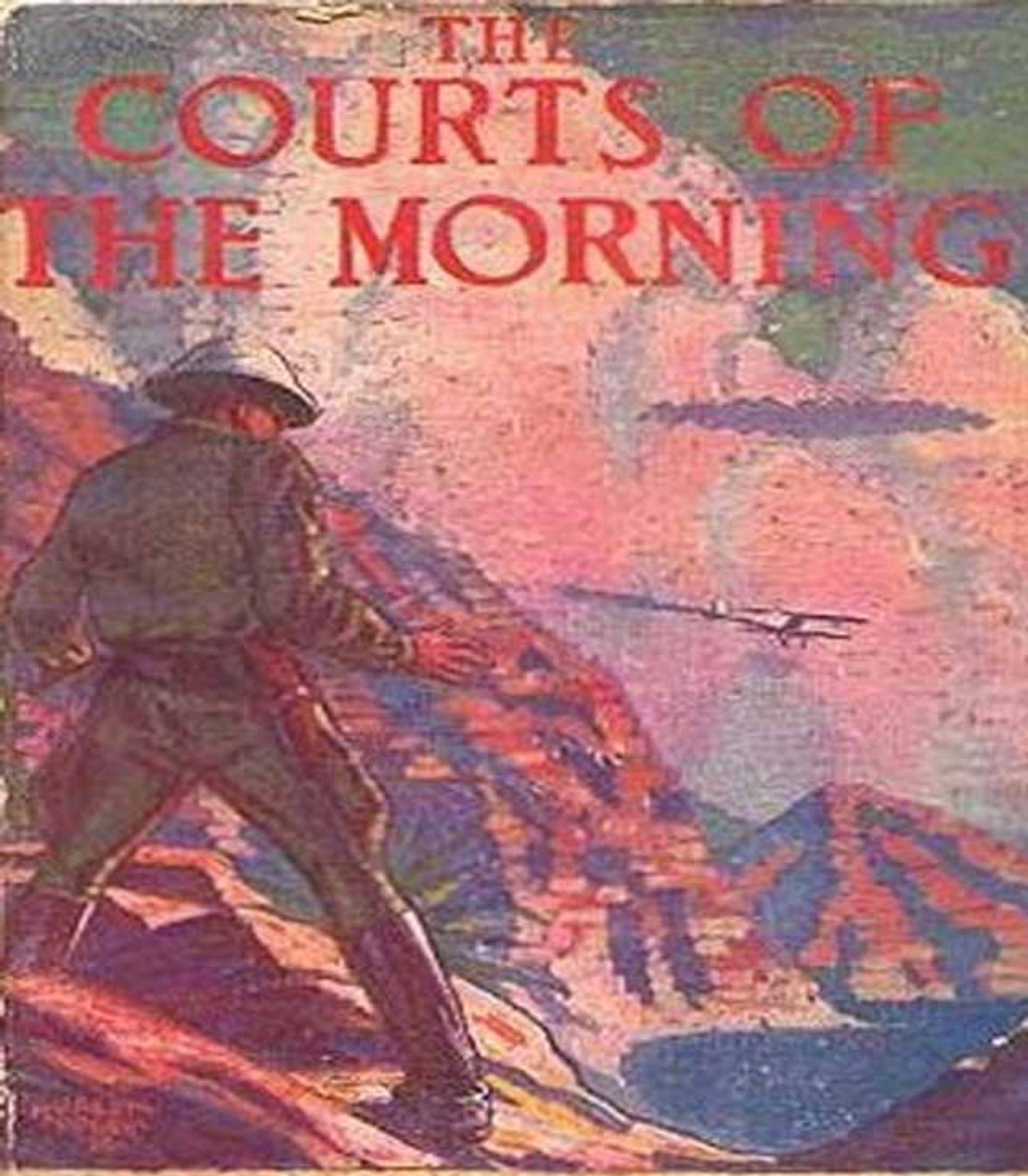
THE COURTS OF THE MORNING



by

JOHN BUCHAN

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PROLOGUE

Chapter I

This story begins, so far as I am concerned, in the August of 192--, when I had for the second time a lease of the forest of Machray. Mary and Peter John and the household had gone north at the end of July, but I was detained for ten days in London over the business of a Rhodesian land company, of which I had recently become chairman. I was putting up at my club, and one morning I was rung up by Ellery Willis of the American Embassy, who had been wiring about me all over the country. He seemed to be in a hurry to see me, so I asked him to luncheon.

I had known Willis in the War, when he had had a field battery with the American 2nd Corps. After that he had been on the Headquarters Staff at Washington, and was now a military attaché at the London Embassy. He seemed to have a good many duties besides the study of military affairs, and when I met him he was always discoursing about world-politics and the need of England and America getting close to each other. I agreed with him about that, but used to tell him that the best way was not to talk too much, but to send Englishmen and Americans fishing together. He was an ardent, rather solemn young man, but with a quick sense of humour, and Mary said he was the best dancer in London.

He cut at once into business.

"You are a friend of Mr Blenkiron's--John S. Blenkiron," he said. "I want to know if you have heard from him lately?"

"Not for months," I said. "Blenkiron was never a regular correspondent, and the fount has dried up since last December."

He looked grave. "That's bad," he said.

"There's nothing wrong?" I asked anxiously.

"Only that nobody knows what has become of him."

"But that was always the old ruffian's way. He likes to cover his tracks, like Providence, and turn up suddenly when he is not expected. There's a lot of the child in him."

Willis shook his head. "I expect there's more to it this time than that. I'll tell you what we know. He made a dive back into Wall Street last fall, and did some big things in electrolytic zinc. Then he went to Santa Catalina, and returned to New York in the second week of January. On the 27th day of that month he sailed for Panama in a fruit-steamer, having previously shut up his office and wound up his affairs as if he were thinking of his decease. From that day no one has clapped eyes on him. He has nothing in the way of family life, but I needn't tell you that he has plenty of friends, and they are beginning to get anxious. All that we can find out is that last March a little Jew man turned up in New York with an order from Mr Blenkiron for a quarter of a million dollars. It was all right, and the money was handed over, and the shape it took was a draft on Valparaiso to be paid after countersignature by our consul there. We got in touch with the consul, and heard that the money had been collected on Mr Blenkiron's instructions by some fellow with a Spanish name."

"That sounds queer," I said.

"It certainly does. But there's something queerer still. In June Mr Neston of the Treasury got a letter--he had been a business associate of Mr Blenkiron's at one time and they used to go bass-fishing in Minnesota. It didn't come by mail, but was handed in one evening at Mr Neston's private residence. It bore no name, but there could be no doubt it was from Mr Blenkiron. I have seen a copy of it with Mr Neston's commentary, and I can tell you it was great stuff. The writer warned his old friend that there might be trouble brewing in certain parts of the world which he did not specify, and he begged him, as he was a good American, to keep his eyes skinned. He also said that he, the writer, might have to ask some day soon for help, and that he counted on getting it. The funny thing was that the letter was in a kind of cypher. I understand that Mr Blenkiron used to write to his friends in a high-coloured version of our national slang, and that he had a good many private expressions that were Choctaw to those that did not know him. That letter might have been read as the perfectly natural expression of a light-headed American, who had been having too many cocktails and was writing drivel about his health and his habits and the fine weather. But, knowing how to construe it, it made Mr Neston sit up and take notice.... There was another thing. I have said that the letter had no name, but it was signed all the same. It seems that in any very important and intimate communication Mr Blenkiron used to make a hieroglyphic of his surname and stick J. S. after it in brackets. That was meant to be a kind of S.O.S. to his friends that the thing was mighty important. Well, this letter had the hieroglyphic in three places, scrawled in as if the writer had been playing absent-mindedly with his pen. Mr Neston's conclusion was that Mr Blenkiron had written it in some place where he was not

allowed to communicate freely, and might be in considerable danger."

I admitted that it looked like it, and said that if Blenkiron had been captured by bandits and held up to ransom, I could vouch for it, from what I knew of him, that his captors had done the worst day's work of their lives. I asked what his Government was doing about it.

"Nothing official," said Willis, "for we are in this difficulty. We are afraid of spoiling Mr Blenkiron's game, whatever it may be. Washington has a very high respect for his talents, and we should hate to cross him by being officious. All the same, we are anxious, and that is why I have come to you."

He proceeded to give me one of his lectures on international affairs. America, by his way of it, was in a delicate position, in spite of being rich enough to buy up the globe. She was trying to set her house in order, and it was a large-sized job, owing to the melting-pot not properly melting but leaving chunks of undigested matter. That was the real reason why she could not take a big hand in world-affairs--the League of Nations and so forth; she had too much to do at home, and wanted all her energies for it. That was the reason, too, why she was so set on prohibition of all kinds--drink, drugs, and aliens. But her hand might be forced, if anything went wrong in the American continent itself, because of her Monroe Doctrine. She didn't want any foreign complications at the moment. They would be very awkward for her, and possibly very dangerous, and she would resolutely keep out of them, unless they occurred, so to speak, opposite her front yard, in which case she would be bound to intervene. Therefore, if anyone wanted to do her the worst kind of turn, he would stir up trouble in some place like South America. Willis

believed that Blenkiron had got on the track of something of the kind, and was trying to warn her.

That sounded reasonable enough, but what was not reasonable was Willis's straight request that I should put on my boots and go and look for him. "We can't do anything officially," he repeated. "An American would be suspected where an Englishman would get through. Besides, I believe you are his closest friend."

Of course I at once disabused him of that notion. I knew old Blenkiron too well to be nervous about him; he could no more be badly lost than Ulysses. I saw Willis's point about American politics, but they were no concern of mine. I told him in so many words that my travelling days were over, that I was a landowner and a married man and the father of a son, with all sorts of prior duties. But he was so downcast at my refusal, and so earnest that something should be done, that I promised to put the matter before Sandy Arbuthnot. I proposed in any case to go to Laverlaw for a couple of days on my way to Machray.

Chapter II

Laverlaw is a very good imitation of the end of the world. You alight at a wayside station in a Border valley, and drive for eight miles up a tributary glen between high green hills; then, when the stream has grown small and you think that the glen must stop, it suddenly opens into an upland paradise--an amphitheatre of turf and woodland which is the park, and in the heart of it an old stone castle. The keep was once a peel-tower, famous in a hundred ballads, and the house which had grown round dated mostly from the sixteenth century. I had never been there before, for the old Lord Clanroyden had lived sick and solitary for years, and Sandy had only succeeded in the previous February. When I arrived in the early gloaming, with that green cup swimming in amber light and the bell-heather on the high ground smouldering in the sunset, I had to rub my eyes to make sure that the place was not a dream. I thought it the right kind of home for Sandy, a fairy-tale fortress lying secret in the hills, from which he could descend to colour the prose of the world.

Sandy met me at the gates and made me get out of the car and walk the rest of the way with him. In his shocking old tweeds, with his lithe figure, his girlish colouring, and his steady, glowing eyes, he fitted well into that fantastic landscape. You could see that he was glad to have me there, and he made me welcome with all his old warmth, but in the half-mile walk I felt a subtle change in him. His talk didn't bubble over as it used to, and I had a feeling that he was rather making conversation. I wondered if being a peer and a landowner and that sort of thing had sobered him, but I promptly dismissed the idea. I wasn't prepared to believe that external circumstances could have any effect on one

who had about as much worldliness as a fakir with his begging-bowl.

All the same there was a change, and I was conscious of it during the evening. Archie Roylance and his young wife were staying there--like me, for the first time. I am prepared to rank Janet Roylance second only to Mary as the prettiest and most delightful thing in the world, and I knew that she and Sandy were close friends. In the daytime she was always, so to speak, booted and spurred, and seemed to have the alertness and vigour of an active boy; but in the evening she used to become the daintiest little porcelain lady; and those who saw Janet as a Dresden shepherdess in a drawing-room would scarcely believe that it was the same person who that morning had been scampering over the heather. She was in tremendous spirits, and Archie is a cheerful soul, but they found it heavy going with Sandy.

We dined in what had been the hall of the thirteenth-century keep--stone walls, a fireplace like a cave, and Jacobean rafters and panelling. Sandy wore the green coat of some Border club, and sat like a solemn sprite in the great chair at the head of his table, while Janet tried to keep the talk going from the other end. The ancient candelabra, which gave a dim religious light, and the long lines of mailed or periwigged Arbuthnots on the wall made the place too heavy a setting for one whom I had always known as a dweller in tents. I felt somehow as if the old Sandy were being shackled and stifled by this feudal magnificence.

The Roylances, having been married in the winter, had postponed their honeymoon, and Janet was full of plans for bringing it off that autumn. She rather fancied the East. Sandy was discouraging. The East, he said, was simply dusty bric-à-brac, for the spirit had gone out of it, and there

were no mysteries left, only half-baked Occidentalism. "Go to Samarkand, and you will get the chatter of Bloomsbury intellectuals. I expect in Lhasa they are discussing Freud."

I suggested South Africa, or a trip up through the Lakes to the Nile. Janet vetoed this, because of Archie's stiff leg; she thought big-game hunting would be bad for him, and she considered with justice that if he were in the neighbourhood of wild beasts he would go after them.

Archie himself was inclined to South America. He said he had always had a romance about that part of the world, and he understood that it was the only place which still held some geographical secrets. Also it appeared that, though a poor linguist, he could talk a sort of Spanish, owing to having spent some time in the Madrid Embassy.

"I've never been there," said Sandy, "and I never want to go. It's too big and badly put together, like a child's mud castle. There's cannibal fish, and every kind of noxious insect, and it's the happy home of poisons, and the people are as ugly as sin. The land isn't built according to our human scale, and I have no taste for nightmares."

"All the same, it's tremendously important," Archie replied. "Charles Lamancha says that all the big problems of the future will be concerned with the New World. It might be rather useful to me in politics if I went and had a look round."

Sandy laughed. "Better go to the States. That's the power-house where you press the button."

This gave me the chance to talk about Blenkiron, and I told them what I had heard from Ellery Willis. Archie, who had only seen Blenkiron in the last year of the War, was rather excited; Sandy, who knew him intimately, was apathetic.

"He'll turn up all right. Trust John S. You can't mislay a battered warrior like that. You'd better tell Willis that he is doing a very poor service to Blenkiron by starting a hue-and-cry. The old man won't like it a bit."

"But, I assure you, Willis is very much in earnest. He wanted me to start out right away on a secret expedition, and to quiet him I promised to speak to you."

"Well, you've spoken," said Sandy, "and you can tell him I think it moonshine. Blenkiron will come back to his friends when his job is done, whatever it may be.... Unless Archie likes to take the thing on?"

He seemed to want to drop the subject, but Janet broke in:

"I always understood that Mr Blenkiron had no relations except the nephew who was killed in the War. But I met a girl last month who was a niece or a cousin of his. She told me she had been staying in the Borders and had been taken to see you at Laverlaw."

Sandy looked up, and I could have sworn that a shade of anxiety passed over his face.

"Her name was Dasent," Janet went on. "I can't remember her Christian name."

"Probably Irene--pronounced Ireen," said Sandy. "I remember her. She came over with the Manorwaters. She seemed to have got a little mixed about Scotland, for she wanted to know why I wasn't wearing a kilt, and I told her 'because I was neither a Highlander nor a Cockney stockbroker.'"

He spoke sharply, as if the visit had left an unpleasant memory.

"I should like to meet a niece of Blenkiron's," I said. "Tell me more about her."

In reply Sandy made a few comments on American young women which were not flattering. I could see what had happened--Sandy at a loose end and a little choked by his new life, and a brisk and ignorant lady who wanted to enthuse about it. They had met 'head on,' as Americans say.

"You didn't like her?" I asked.

"I didn't think enough about her to dislike her. Ask Janet."

"I only saw her for about an hour," said that lady. "She came to stay with Junius and Agatha at Strathlarrig just when I was leaving. I think I rather liked her. She was from South Carolina, and had a nice, soft, slurring voice. So far as I remember she talked very little. She looked delicious, too--

tallish and slim and rather dark, with deep eyes that said all sorts of wonderful things. You must be as blind as a bat, Sandy, if you didn't see that."

"I am. I don't boast of it--indeed I'm rather ashamed of it--but I'm horribly unsusceptible. Once--long ago--when I was at Oxford, I was staying in the West Highlands, and in the evening we sat in a room which looked over the sea into the sunset, and a girl sang old songs. I don't remember whether she was pretty or not--I don't remember her name--but I remember that her singing made me want to fall in love.... Since I grew up I've had no time."

Janet was shocked. "But, Sandy dear, you must marry."

He shook his head. "Never! I should make a rotten husband. Besides, Dick and Archie have carried off the only two women I love."

After that he seemed to cheer up. I remember that he took to telling stories of poisons--I suppose the mention of South America set him off on that. He showed us a box with three tiny pellets in it, things which looked like discoloured pearls, and which he said were the most mysterious narcotics in the world, and one of the deadliest poisons. They reminded me of pills I once got from an old Portugee prospector, which I carried about with me for years but never touched, pills to be used if you were lost in the bush, for one was said to put you into a forty-hours sleep and two gave a painless death. Sandy would explain nothing further about them, and locked them away.

What with one thing and another we had rather a jolly evening. But next morning, when the Roylances had gone, I had the same impression of some subtle change. This new Sandy was not the one I had known. We went for a long tramp on the hills, with sandwiches in our pockets, for neither of us seemed inclined to shoulder a gun. It was a crisp morning with a slight frost, and before midday it had become one of those blazing August days when there is not a breath of wind and the heather smells as hot as tamarisks. We climbed the Lammer Law and did about twenty miles of a circuit along the hill-tops. It was excellent training for Machray, and I would have enjoyed myself had it not been for Sandy.

He talked a great deal and it was all in one strain, and--for a marvel--all about himself. The gist of it was that he was as one born out of due season, and mighty discontented with his lot.

"I can't grow old decently," he said. "Here am I--over forty--and I haven't matured one bit since I left Oxford. I don't want to do the things befitting my age and position. I suppose I ought to be ambitious--make speeches in the House of Lords--become an expert on some rotten subject--take the chair at public dinners--row my weight in the silly old boat--and end by governing some distant Dominion."

"Why not?" I asked.

"Because I don't want to. I'd rather eat cold mutton in a cabman's shelter, as Lamancha once observed about political banquets. Good Lord, Dick, I can't begin to tell you how I loathe the little squirrel's cage of the careerists. All that solemn twaddle about trifles! Oh, I daresay it's got to

be done by somebody, but not by me. If I touched politics I'd join the Labour Party, not because I think them less futile than the others, but because as yet they haven't got such a larder of loaves and fishes."

"I want a job," he declared a little later. "I was meant by Providence to be in a service, and to do work under discipline--not for what it brought me, but because it had to be done. I'm a bad case of the inferiority complex. When I see one of my shepherds at work, or the hands coming out of a factory, I'm ashamed of myself. They all have their niche, and it is something that matters, whereas I am a cumberer of the ground. If I want to work I've got to make the job for myself, and the one motive is personal vanity. I tell you, I'm in very real danger of losing my self-respect."

It was no good arguing with Sandy in this mood, though there were a great many common-sense things I wanted to say. The danger with anyone so high-strung and imaginative as he is that every now and then come periods of self-disgust and despondency.

"You're like Ulysses," I told him. "The fellow in Tennyson's poem, you know. Well, there's a widish world before you, and a pretty unsettled one. Ships sail every day to some part of it."

He shook his head.

"That's the rub. As I've told you, I can't grow up. There's a couple of lines by some poet that describes me accurately: 'He is crazed by the spell of far Arabia, It has stolen his mind away.' Far Arabia--that's my trouble. But the Ulysses

business won't do for an ageing child of forty. Besides, what about the mariners? Where are the 'free hearts, free foreheads?' We used to have a rather nice little Round Table, Dick, but it is all broken up now and the wood turned into cigar-boxes for wedding presents. Peter is dead, and you and Archie are married, and Leithen and Lamancha are happy parts of the machine."

"There's still Blenkiron."

"He doesn't count. He was a wandering star, that joined us and revolved cheerfully with us for a little, and then shot back to where it belonged.... You can't alter it by talking, my dear chap. I'm the old buccaneer marooned on a rock, watching his ancient companions passing in ocean liners."

We had reached the top of the hill above Laverlaw and were looking down into the green cup filled with the afternoon sunlight, in which the house seemed as natural a thing as a stone from the hillside. I observed that it was a very pleasant rock to be marooned on. Sandy stared at the scene, and for a moment did not reply.

"I wish I had been born an Englishman," he said at last. "Then I could have lived for that place, and been quite content to grow old in it. But that has never been our way. Our homes were only a jumping-off ground. We loved them painfully and were always home-sick for them, but we were very little in them. That is the blight on us--we never had any sense of a continuing city, and our families survived only by accident. It's a miracle that I'm the sixteenth Clanroyden.... It's not likely that there will be a seventeenth."

Chapter III

I left Laverlaw rather anxious about Sandy, and during our time at Machray I thought a good deal about my friend. He was in an odd, jumpy, unpredictable state of mind, and I didn't see what was to be the outcome of it. At Machray I had a piece of news which showed his restlessness. Martendale, the newspaper man, came to stay, and was talking about boats, for his chief hobby is yacht-racing.

"What's Arbuthnot up to now?" he asked. "I saw him at Cowes--at least I'm pretty sure it was he. In an odd get-up, even for him."

I said that I had been staying with Sandy in August and that he had never mentioned Cowes, so I thought he must be mistaken. But Martendale was positive. He had been on the Squadron lawn, looking down on the crowd passing below, and he had seen Sandy, and caught his eye. He knew him slightly, but apparently Sandy had not wanted to be recognised and had simply stared at him. Martendale noticed him later, lunching out of a paper bag with the other trippers on the front. He was dressed like a yacht's hand, rather a shabby yacht's hand, and Martendale said that he thought he had a glimpse of him later with some of the crew of the big Argentine steam yacht, the Santa Barbara, which had been at Cowes that year. "The dago does not make an ornamental sailor," said Martendale, "and if it was Arbuthnot, and I am pretty certain it was, he managed to assimilate himself very well to his background. I only picked him out of the bunch by his clean-cut face. Do you happen to know if he speaks Spanish? They were all jabbering that lingo."

"Probably," I said. "He's one of the best linguists alive. But, all the same, I think you were mistaken. I saw him a fortnight later, and, I can tell you, he isn't in the humour for escapades."

In November, when I ran up to London from Fosse for a few days, I got further news of Sandy which really disquieted me. It appeared that he had gone down to the grass countries to hunt--a fact which in itself surprised me, for, though a fine horseman, he had always professed to hate hunting society. But for some reason or other he kept a couple of horses at Birkham and spent a lot of time there. And he seemed to have got mixed up with a rather raffish lot, for since the War the company in the Shires has not been what you might call select. The story told to me was that at a dinner where much champagne was swallowed Sandy had had a drunken row with a young profiteering lout, which had just about come to blows. He seemed to have behaved rather badly at dinner and worse later, for after having made a scene he had bolted, shown the white feather, and refused to take responsibility for what he had done.

Of course I didn't believe a word of it. In the first place, Sandy was as abstemious as a Moslem; in the second place, he had the temper of a seraph and never quarrelled; and, in the third place, he didn't keep any white feathers in his collection. But the story was repeated everywhere and, I am sorry to say, was believed. You see, Sandy had a great reputation in a vague way, but he hadn't the kind of large devoted acquaintance which could be always trusted to give the lie to a slander. And I am bound to say that this story was abominably circumstantial. I had it from an eye-witness, quite a decent fellow whose word it was hard to disbelieve.

He described a horrid scene--Sandy, rather drunk and deliberately insulting an ill-tempered oaf in the same condition, and then, when it almost came to fisticuffs, funking the consequences, and slipping off early next morning without a word of explanation.

I hotly denied the whole thing, but my denials did not carry very far. Sandy had disappeared again, and his absence gave gossip its chance. The ordinary story was that he had taken to drink or drugs--most people said drugs. Even those who believed in him began to talk of a bad break-down, and explained that the kind of life he had led was bound some day to exact its penalty. I tried to get hold of him, but my telegrams to Laverlaw brought the answer that his lordship had gone abroad and left no address for letters.

Three days after Christmas I got the shock of my life. I opened The Times and found on the foreign page a short telegram from New York which reported the death of Mr John Scantlebury Blenkiron on board his yacht at Honolulu. The message said that he had once been well known as a mining engineer, and that at various times he had made coups in Wall Street.

I took the first train to London and interviewed Ellery Willis at the Embassy. He confirmed the news, for he had had a wire from Washington to the same effect.

"What did he die of?" I demanded. "And what was he doing at Honolulu? And in a yacht? He loathed the sea. He used to

say that he would as soon take to yachting for pleasure as make his meals off emetics."

"He must have been ill some time," Willis suggested. "That would account for his disappearance. He wanted to be by himself, like a sick animal."

I simply wouldn't credit it, and I asked Willis to wire for details. But none came--only a recapitulation of the bare fact. When a week later I got the American papers, my scepticism was a little shaken. For there were obituaries with photographs. The writers enlarged on his business career, but said nothing about his incursions into politics, nor did they give any further news of his illness. I was almost convinced, but not quite. The obituaries were full, but not full enough, for Blenkiron had been a big figure, and one would have expected the press to go large on his career and personality. But the notices all gave me the impression of having been written to order and deliberately keeping wide of the subject. There was nothing in the way of personal reminiscences, no attempt to describe his character or assess his work. The articles were uncommonly like the colourless recitals you find in a biographical dictionary.

I wired about it to Sandy, and got a reply from his butler that he was still abroad, address unknown. I wished that I knew where to find the niece who had visited Laverlaw in the summer, but Janet Roylance, to whom I applied, could tell me nothing. She and Archie were setting out almost at once on their delayed honeymoon, and had chosen South America.

I have one other incident to record before I bring these preliminaries to a close. Palliser-Yeates came to stay with us for a week-end in January, and one night, after Mary had gone to bed, we sat talking in the library. He had never known Blenkiron, but he was a friend of Sandy, and to him I unburdened my anxieties. I thought he listened to me with an odd look on his face.

"You don't believe the stories?" he asked.

"Not one blessed word," I said. "But the poor old chap has managed to get himself a pretty fly-blown reputation."

"Perhaps he wanted to," was the astounding answer.

I stared, and asked him what he meant.

"It's only a guess," he said. "But Sandy has for a long time had a unique reputation. Not with the world at large, but with the people who matter in two hemispheres. He was known to be one of the most formidable men in the world. Now, suppose that he was engaged, or about to be engaged, in some very delicate and dangerous business. He would be marked down from the start by certain people who feared him. So he might wish to be counted out, to be regarded as no longer formidable, and what better way than to have it generally believed that his nerve had gone and that he was all to pieces? If I wanted to create that impression, I would lay the foundation of it in the Shires, where they make a speciality of scandal. If that was his purpose, he has certainly succeeded. By this time the rumour has gone all over Europe in the circles where his name was known."

I was digesting this startling hypothesis, when Palliser-Yeates told me the following story:

He had been in Paris just before Christmas on some business connected with Argentine banking, and one of his South American colleagues had taken him to dine at a restaurant much in vogue among the rastas. I think it was on the Rive Gauche, not a specially reputable place, but with amazingly good food. The proprietor was from the Argentine, and all the staff were South Americans. Palliser-Yeates noticed one of the waiters, not at his own table but a little way off, and he recognised the man's face. The hair and skin were darkened, but he was positive that it was Sandy--Sandy in a greasy dress suit and a made-up black tie. When the room filled up and got rather noisy, he made an errand to speak to the conductor of the orchestra, and managed to get a word with this waiter. He cannoned against him in one of the doors and said, "Sorry, Sandy." The waiter knew him perfectly, and whispered from behind his pile of dishes, "Don't give me away, John. It's damnably serious. And never come here again." So Palliser-Yeates took himself off, and had scrupulously held his tongue except for telling me. He said that Sandy looked well enough, and seemed to have mastered his job, for you couldn't detect any difference between him and the rest of the outfit.

When I heard this, I decided to go to Paris myself and have a look at the restaurant, for anxiety about Sandy was coming between me and my sleep. There was something about Palliser-Yeates's story which took my memory back a dozen years to old Kuprasso's dancing-house in Constantinople and the man who had led the Company of the Rosy Hours. Sandy was on the war-path again, and I was bound to keep an eye on him.

But two days later I had a letter--from Blenkiron. It had a typed address and a Southampton postmark--which was no clue, for it had probably been brought over by a passenger in a ship and posted at the port of arrival. The handwriting was Blenkiron's unmistakable scrawl. It ran as follows:

"The papers will say I have gotten across the River. Don't let that worry you. But the Golden Shore at present is important and I may have to stay there quite a time. Therefore keep up the requiems and dirges until further notice."

Also at last I got a reply from Sandy, in answer to my string of letters. It was a telegram from London, so he had left Paris, and it merely contained Abraham Lincoln's words: "You stop still and saw wood."

After that I stopped still. Both Blenkiron and Sandy were up to some devilry, and I had an instinct that they were working together. I have set down here my slender personal knowledge of the beginning of the strange events now to be related. The rest comes from the actors themselves.

BOOK I

THE GRAN SECO

Chapter I

The open windows, protected by wire blinds as fine-meshed as gauze, allowed the cool airs from the sea to slip in from the dusk. The big restaurant was in a pleasant gloom broken by patches of candlelight from the few occupied tables. The Hotel de la Constitución stands on a little promontory above the harbour of Olifa, so the noise of the streets comes to it only like the echo of waves from a breakwater. Archie Roylance, looking into the great square of velvet sky now beginning to be patterned by stars, felt as if he were still at sea.

The Vice-Consul interpreted his thoughts.

"You are surprised at the quiet," he said. "That is only because we dine early. In a little there will be many lights and a jigging band and young people dancing. Yet we have good taste in Olifa and are not garish. If you will be my guest on another occasion, I will take you to a club as well equipped as any in Pall Mall, or to a theatre where you will see better acting than in London, and I will give you a supper afterwards which Voisin's could not better. We have civilisation, you see--for what it is worth."

The Vice-Consul, whose name was Alejandro Gedd, was a small man with a neat, dark, clean-shaven face, and high cheek-bones from which his critics deduced Indian blood. As a matter of fact they came from another ancestry. His grandfather, Alexander Geddes, had come out in his youth from Dundee as a clerk in a merchant's house, had prospered, married a pretty Olifera, begotten a son, and founded a bank which rose in the silver boom to fortune.

That son had married a lady of pure Castilian descent, whose beauty was not equal to her lineage, so the grandson of old Geddes had missed both the vigour of the Scot and the suave comeliness of the Olifera. Don Alejandro was an insignificant little man, and he was growing fat. The father had sold his interest in the bank at a high figure, and had thereafter dabbled in politics and horse-breeding; the son, at his death, had promptly got rid of the stud and left the government of his country to get on without him. He had been sent to an English school, and later to the Sorbonne, and had emerged from his education a dilettante and a cosmopolitan. He professed a stout Olifa patriotism, but his private sentiment was for England, and in confidential moments he would speak of his life as exile. Already he had asked Archie a dozen questions about common friends, and had dwelt like an epicure on the recollections of his last visit--the Park on a May morning, an English garden in midsummer, the Solent in August, the October colouring of Scottish hills. His dinner-jacket had been made in the vicinity of Hanover Square, and he hoped that his black stock and his black-ribboned eyeglass were, if not English, at any rate European.

Archie was looking at the windows. "Out there is the Pacific," he said, "nothing nearer you than China. What is it like the other way?"

"The coastal plain for a hundred miles. Then the foothills and the valleys where the wine is made. A very pretty light claret, I assure you. Then, for many hundreds of miles, the great mountains."

"Have you travelled there much?"

Don Alejandro shook his head. "I do not travel in this land. What is there to see? In the mountains there are nothing but Indians and wild animals and bleak forests and snow. I am content with this city, where, as I have said, there is civilisation."

"A man I met on the boat told me about a place called the Gran Seco. He said it was bound to be soon the greatest copper area in the world."

Don Alejandro laughed. "That ill-favoured spot becomes famous. Five years ago it was scarcely known. To-day many strangers ask me about it. The name is Indian-Spanish. You must understand that a hundred miles north of this city the coastal plain ends, and the Cordilleras swing round so that there is no room between them and the ocean. But at the curve the mountains, though high, are not the great peaks. These are far to the east, and you have for a big space a kind of tableland. That is what we call the Gran Seco--the Great Thirst--for it is mostly waterless and desert. But it is very rich in minerals. For long we have known that, and before the War there were many companies at work there. Now there is one great company, in which our Government has a share, and from which Olifa derives much of its wealth. The capital employed is mostly foreign--no, not American--European, but of what country I do not know. The labourers are the people of the hills, and the managers are Europeans of many nationalities. They pass through this city going and coming--through this hotel often--perhaps we may see some of them to-night. They are strange folk who do not mix freely with us of Olifa. I am told they are growing as wealthy as Rockefeller. There are no English among them, I think--Slavs mostly, with some Italians and now and then a German, so I do not come across them in the way of business, and it would appear that they have no time for

pleasure.... May I ask, Sir Archibald, for what purpose especially you honour us with a visit? I want to know how best I can serve you."

Archie wrinkled his brow. "You are very kind, Don Alejandro. The fact is we're here mainly for the fun of it. This is a sort of belated honeymoon trip. Also, I'd like to know something about the politics of Olifa and South America generally. You see, I'm a Member of Parliament, and I've an idea that this part of the globe may soon become rather important. I have brought several introductions."

Don Alejandro waved his hand deprecatingly.

"That will be readily arranged. Your Minister is on leave, and the Embassy has left you in my hands. Without doubt you will be received by our President. I myself will take you to our Minister for External Affairs, who is my second cousin. Our Minister of Finance will expound to you our extravagant prosperity. But of politics in the old sense you will find little. We are too rich and too busy. When we were poor we talked government all the day. And we had revolutions--dictatorships tempered by revolutions. My father more than once saved his neck by the good blood of his racing stable. But now we are very tame and virtuous. Our Government is rich enough to be enlightened, and our people, being also rich, do not trouble their heads about theories. Even the peons on the estancias and the vaqueros in the hills are content. Olifa is--how do you say?--a plutocratic democracy--a liberal plutocracy. Once it was a battered little packet-boat, now it is a great liner careless of weather and tides. It has no problems, this fortunate country."