John Macnab

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Chapter

1 IN WHICH THREE GENTLEMEN CONFESS THEIR ENNUI

The great doctor stood on the hearth-rug looking down at his friend who sprawled before him in an easy-chair. It was a hot day in early July, and the windows were closed and the blinds half-down to keep out the glare and the dust. The standing figure had bent shoulders, a massive clean-shaven face, and a keen interrogatory air, and might have passed his sixtieth birthday. He looked like a distinguished lawyer, who would soon leave his practice for the Bench. But it was the man in the chair who was the lawyer, a man who had left forty behind him, but was still on the pleasant side of fifty.

"I tell you for the tenth time that there's nothing the matter with you."

"And I tell you for the tenth time that I'm miserably ill."

The doctor shrugged his shoulders. "Then it's a mind diseased, to which I don't propose to minister. What do you say is wrong?"

"Simply what my housekeeper calls a 'no-how' feeling."

"It's clearly nothing physical. Your heart and lungs are sound. Your digestion's as good as anybody's can be in London in Midsummer. Your nerves—well, I've tried all the stock tests, and they appear to be normal."

"Oh, my nerves are all right," said the other wearily.

"Your brain seems good enough, except for this dismal obsession that you are ill. I can find no earthly thing wrong, except that you're stale. I don't say run-down, for that you're not. You're stale in mind. You want a holiday."

"I don't. I may need one, but I don't want it. That's precisely the trouble. I used to be a glutton for holidays, and spent my leisure moments during term planning what I was going to do. Now there seems to be nothing in the world I want to do—neither work nor play."

"Try fishing. You used to be keen."

"I've killed all the salmon I mean to kill. I never want to look the ugly brutes in the face again."

"Shooting?"

"Too easy and too dull."

"A yacht."

"Stop it, old fellow. Your catalogue of undesired delights only makes it worse. I tell you that there's nothing at this moment which has the slightest charm for me. I'm bored with my work, and I can't think of anything else of any kind for which I would cross the street. I don't even

want to go into the country and sleep. It's been coming on for a long time—I did not feel it so badly, for I was in a service and not my own master. Now I've nothing to do except to earn an enormous income, which I haven't any need for. Work comes rolling in—I've got retainers for nearly every solvent concern in this land—and all that happens is that I want to strangle my clerk and a few eminent solicitors. I don't care a tinker's curse for success, and what is worse, I'm just as apathetic about the modest pleasures which used to enliven my life."

"You may be more tired than you think."

"I'm not tired at all." The speaker rose from his chair yawning, and walked to the windows to stare into the airless street. He did not look tired, for his movements were vigorous, and, though his face had the slight pallor of his profession, his eye was clear and steady. He turned round suddenly.

"I tell you what I've got, It's what the Middle ages suffered from—I read a book about it the other day—and its called Taedium Vitae. It's a special kind of ennui. I can diagnose my ailment well enough and Shakespeare has the words for it. I've come to a pitch where I find 'nothing left remarkable beneath the visiting moon.'"

Then why do you come to me, if the trouble is not with your body?"

"Because you're you. I should come to you just the same if you were a vet., or a bone-setter, or a Christian Scientist. I want your advice, not as a fashionable consultant, but as an old friend and a wise man. It's a state of affairs that can't go on. What am I to do to get rid of this infernal disillusionment? I can't go through the rest of my life dragging my wing."

The doctor was smiling.

"If you ask my professional advice," he said, "I am bound to tell you that medical science has no suggestion to offer. If you consult me as a friend, I advise you to steal a horse in some part of the world where a horse-thief is usually hanged."

The other considered. "Pretty drastic prescription for a man who has been a Law Officer of the Crown."

"I speak figuratively. You've got to rediscover the comforts of your life by losing them for a little. You have good food and all the rest of it at your command—well, you've got to be in want for a bit to appreciate them. You're secure and respected and rather eminent—well, somehow or other get under the weather. If you could induce the newspapers to accuse you of something shady and have the devil of a job to clear yourself it might do the trick. The fact is, you've grown too competent. You need to be made to struggle for your life again—your life or your reputation. You have to find out the tonic of difficulty, and you can't find it in your profession. Therefore I say 'Steal a horse.'"

A faint interest appeared in the other's eyes.

"That sounds to me good sense. But, hang it all, it's utterly unpractical. I can't go looking for scrapes. I should feel like play-acting if in cold blood I got myself into difficulties, and I take it that the essence of your prescription is that I must feel desperately in earnest."

"I'm not prescribing. Heaven forbid that I should advise a friend to look for trouble. I'm merely stating how in the abstract I regard your case."

The patient rose to go. "Miserable comforters are ye all," he groaned. "Well, it appears you can do nothing for me except to suggest the advisability of crime. I suppose it's no good trying to make you take a fee?"

The doctor shook his head. "I wasn't altogether chaffing. Honestly, you would be the better of dropping for a month or two into another world—a harder one. A hand on a cattle-boat, for instance."

Sir Edward Leithen sighed deeply as he turned from the doorstep down the long hot street. He did not look behind him, or he would have seen another gentleman approach cautiously round the corner of a side-street, and, when the coast was clear, ring the doctor's bell. He was so completely fatigued with life that he neglected to be cautious at crossings, as was his habit, and was all but slain by a motor-omnibus. Everything seemed weary and over-familiar—the summer smell of town, the din of traffic, the panorama of faces, pretty women shopping, the occasional sight of a friend. Long ago, he reflected with disgust, there had been a time when he had enjoyed it all.

He found sanctuary at last in the shade and coolness of his club. He remembered that he was dining out, and bade the porter telephone that he could not come, giving no reason. He remembered, too, that there was a division in the House that night, an important division advertised by a three-line whip. He declined to go near the place. At any rate, he would have the dim consolation of behaving badly. His clerk was probably at the moment hunting feverishly for him, for he had missed a consultation in the great Argentine bank case which was in the paper next morning. That could also slide. He wanted, nay, he was determined, to make a mess of it.

Then he discovered that he was hungry, and that it was nearly the hour when a man may dine. "I've only one positive feeling left," he told himself, "the satisfaction of my brute needs. Nice position for a gentleman and a Christian!"

There was one other man in the dining-room, sitting at the little table in the window. At first sight he had the look of an undergraduate, a Rugby Blue, perhaps, who had just come down from the University, for he had the broad, slightly stooped shoulders of the football-player. He had a ruddy face, untidy sandy hair, and large reflective grey eyes. It was those eyes which declared his age, for round them were the many fine wrinkles which come only from the passage of time.

"Hullo, John," said Leithen. "May I sit at your table?"

The other, whose name was Palliser-Yeates, nodded.

"You may certainly eat in my company, but I've got nothing to say to you, Ned. I'm feeling as dried-up as a dead starfish."

They ate their meal in silence, and so preoccupied was Sir Edward Leithen with his own affairs that it did not seem to him strange that Mr Palliser-Yeates, who was commonly a person of robust spirits and plentiful conversation, should have the air of a deaf-mute. When they had reached the fish, two other diners took their seats and waved them a greeting. One of them was a youth with lean, high-coloured cheeks, who limped slightly; the other a tallish older man with a long dark face, a small dark moustache, and a neat pointed chin which gave him something of the air of a hidalgo. He looked weary and glum, but his companion seemed to be in the best of tempers, for his laugh rang out in that empty place with a startling boyishness. Mr Palliser-Yeates looked up angrily, with a shiver.

"Noisy brute, Archie Roylance!" he observed. "I suppose he's above himself since Ascot. His horse won some beastly race, didn't it? It's a good thing to be young and an ass."

There was that in his tone which roused Leithen from his apathy. He cast a sharp glance at the other's face.

"You're off-colour."

"No," said the other brusquely. "I'm perfectly fit. Only I'm getting old."

This was food for wonder, inasmuch as Mr Palliser-Yeates had a reputation for a more than youthful energy and, although forty-five years of age, was still accustomed to do startling things on the Chamonix Aiguilles. He was head of an eminent banking firm and something of an authority on the aberrations of post-war finance.

A gleam of sympathy came into Leithen's eyes.

"How does it take you?" he asked.

"I've lost zest. Everything seems more or less dust and ashes. When you suddenly wake up and find that you've come to regard your respectable colleagues as so many fidgety old women and the job you've given your life to as an infernal squabble about trifles—why, you begin to wonder what's going to happen."

"I suppose a holiday ought to happen."

"The last thing I want. That's my complaint. I have no desire to do anything, work or play, and yet I'm not tired—only bored."

Leithen's sympathy had become interest.

"Have you seen a doctor?"

The other hesitated. "Yes," he said at length. "I saw old Acton Croke this afternoon. He was no earthly use. He advised me to go to Moscow and fix up a trade agreement. He thought that might make me content with my present lot."

"He told me to steal a horse."

Mr Palliser-Yeates stared in extreme surprise. "You! Do you feel the same way? Have you been to Croke?"

"Three hours ago. I thought he talked good sense. He said I must get into a rougher life so as to appreciate the blessings of the life that I'm fed up with. Probably he is right, but you can't take that sort of step in cold blood."

Mr. Palliser-Yeates assented. The fact of having found an associate in misfortune seemed to enliven slightly, very slightly, the spirits of both. From the adjoining table came, like an echo from a happier world, the ringing voice and hearty laughter of youth. Leithen jerked his head towards them.

"I would give a good deal for Archie's gusto," he said. "My sound right leg, for example. Or, if I couldn't I'd like Charles Lamancha's insatiable ambition. If you want as much as he wants, you don't suffer from tedium."

Palliser-Yeates looked at the gentleman in question, the tall dark one of the two diners. "I'm not so sure. Perhaps he had got too much too easily. He has come on uncommon quick, you know, and, if you do that, there's apt to arrive a moment when you flag."

Lord Lamancha—the title had no connection with Don Quixote and Spain, but was the name of a shieling in a Border glen which had been the home six centuries ago of the ancient house of Merkland—was an object of interest to many of his countrymen. The Marquis of Liddesdale, his father, was a hale old man who might reasonably be expected to live for another ten years and so prevent his son's career being compromised by a premature removal to the House of Lords. He had a safe seat for a London division, was a member of the Cabinet, and had a high reputation for the matter-of-fact oratory which has replaced the pre-war grandiloquence. People trusted him, because, in spite of his hidalgo-ish appearance, he was believed to have that combination of candour and intelligence which England desires in her public men. Also he was popular, for his record in the war and the rumour of a youth spent in adventurous travel touched the imagination of the ordinary citizen. At the moment he was being talked of for a great Imperial post which was soon to become vacant, and there was gossip, in the alternative, of a Ministerial readjustment which would make him the pivot of a controversial Government. It was a remarkable position for a man to have won in his early forties, who had entered public life with every disadvantage of birth.

"I suppose he's happy," said Leithen. "But I've always held that there was a chance of Charles kicking over the traces. I doubt if his ambition is an organic part of him and not stuck on with pins. There's a fundamental daftness in all Merklands. I remember him at school."

The two men finished their meal and retired to the smoking-room, where they drank their coffee abstractedly. Each was thinking about the other, and wondering what light the other's case could shed on his own. The speculation gave each a faint glimmer of comfort.

Presently the voice of Sir Archibald Roylance was heard, and that ebullient young man flung himself down on a sofa beside Leithen, while Lord Lamancha selected a cigar. Sir Archie settled his game leg to his satisfaction, and filled an ancient pipe.

"Heavy weather," he announced. "I've been tryin' to cheer up old Charles and it's been like castin' a fly against a thirty-mile gale. I can't make out what's come over him. Here's a deservin' lad like me struggling at the foot of the ladder and not cast down, and there's Charles high up on the top rungs as glum as an owl and declarin' that the whole thing's foolishness. Shockin' spectacle for youth."

Lamancha, who had found an arm-chair beside Palliser-Yeates, looked at the others and smiled wryly.

"Is that true, Charles?" Leithen asked. "Are you also feeling hipped? Because John and I have just been confessing to each other that we're more fed up with everything in this gay world than we've ever been before in our useful lives."

Lamancha nodded. "I don't know what has come over me. I couldn't face the House to-night, so I telephoned to Archie to come and cheer me. I suppose I'm stale, but it's a new kind of staleness, for I'm perfectly fit in body, and I can't honestly say I feel weary in mind. It's simply that the light has gone out of the landscape. Nothing has any savour."

The three men had been a school together, they had been contemporaries at the University, and close friends ever since. They had no secrets from each other. Leithen, into whose face and voice had come a remote hint of interest, gave a sketch of his own mood, and the diagnosis of the eminent consultant. Archie Roylance stared blankly from one to the other, as if some new thing had broken in upon his simple philosophy of life.

"You fellows beat me," he cried. "Here you are, every one of you a swell of sorts, with every thing to make you cheerful, and you're grousin' like a labour battalion! You should be jolly well ashamed of yourselves. It's fairly temptin' Providence. What you want is some hard exercise. Go and sweat ten hours a day on a steep hill, and you'll get rid of these notions."

"My dear Archie," said Leithen. "your prescription is too crude. I used to be fond enough of sport, but I wouldn't stir a foot to catch a sixty-pound salmon or kill a fourteen pointer. I don't want to. I see no fun in it. I'm Blase. It's too easy."

"Well, I'm dashed! You're the worst spoiled chap I ever heard of, and a nice example to democracy." Archie spoke as if his gods had been blasphemed.

"Democracy, anyhow, is a good example to us. I know now why workmen strike sometimes and can't give any reason. We're on strike—against our privileges."

Archie was not listening. "Too easy, you say?" he repeated. "I call that pretty fair conceit. I've seen you miss birds often enough, old fellow."

"Nevertheless, it seems to me too easy. Everything has become too easy, both work and play."

"You can screw up the difficulty, you know. Try shootin' with a twenty bore, or fishin' for salmon with a nine-foot rod and a dry-fly cast."

"I don't want to kill anything," said Palliser-Yeates. "I don't see the fun of it."

Archie was truly shocked. Then a light of reminiscence came into his eye. "You remind me of poor old Jim Tarras," he said thoughtfully.

There were no inquiries about Jim Tarras, so Archie volunteered further news.

"You remember Jim? He had a little place somewhere in Moray, and spent most of his time shootin' in East Africa. Poor chap, he went back there with Smuts in the war and perished of blackwater. Well, when his father died and he came home to settle down, he found it an uncommon dull job. So, to enliven it, he invented a new kind of sport. He knew all there was to be known about Shikar, and from trampin' about the Highlands he had a pretty accurate knowledge of the country-side. So he used to write to the owner of a deer forest and present his compliments, and beg to inform him that between certain dates he proposed to kill one of his stags. When he had killed it he undertook to deliver it to the owner, for he wasn't a thief."

"I call that poaching on the grand scale," observed Palliser-Yeates.

"Wasn't it? Most of the fellows he wrote to accepted his challenge and told him to come and do his damnedest. Little Avington, I remember, turned on every man and boy about the place for three nights to watch the forest. Jim usually worked at night, you see. One or two curmudgeons talked of the police and prosecutin' him, but public opinion was against them—too dashed unsportin'."

"Did he always get his stag?" Leithen asked.

"In-var-iably, and got it off the ground and delivered it to the owner, for that was the rule of the game. Sometimes he had a precious near squeak, and Avington, who was going off his head at the time, tried to pot him—shot a gillie in the leg too. But Jim always won out. I should think he was the best Shikari God ever made."

"Is that true, Archie?" Lamancha's voice had a magisterial tone.

"True—as—true. I know all about it, far Wattie Lithgow, who was Jim's man, is with me now. He and his wife keep house for me at Crask. Jim never took but the one man with him, and that was Wattie, and he made him just about as cunning an old dodger as himself."

Leithen yawned. "What sort of a place is Crask?" he inquired.

"Tiny little place. No fishin' except some hill lochs and only rough shootin'. I take it for the birds. Most marvellous nestin' ground in Britain barrin' some of the Outer Islands. I don't know why it should be, but it is. Something to do with the Gulf Stream, maybe. Anyhow, I've got the greenshank breedin' regularly and the red-throated diver, and half a dozen rare duck. It's a marvellous stoppin' place in spring too, for birds goin' north."

"Are you much there?"

"Generally in April, and always from the middle of August till the middle of October. You see, it's about the only place I know where you can do exactly as you like. The house is stuck away up on a long slope of moor, and you see the road for a mile from the windows, so you've plenty of time to take to the hills if anybody comes to worry you. I roost there with old Sime, my butler, and the two Lithgows, and put up a pal now and then who likes the life. It's the jolliest bit of the year for me."

"Have you any neighbours?"

"Heaps, but they don't trouble me much. Crask's the earthenware pot among the brazen vessels—mighty hard to get to and nothing to see when you get there. So the brazen vessels keep to themselves."

Lamancha went to a shelf of books above a writing-table and returned with an atlas. "Who are your brazen vessels?" he asked.

"Well, my brassiest is old Claybody at Haripol—that's four miles off across the hill."

"Bit of a swine, isn't he?" said Leithen.

"Oh, no. He's rather a good old bird himself. Don't care so much for his family. Then there's Glenraden t'other side of the Larrig"—he indicated a point on the map which Lamancha was studying—"with a real old Highland grandee living in it—Alastair Raden—commanded the Scots Guards, I believe, in the year One. Family as old as the Flood and very poor, but just manage to hang on. He's the last Raden that will live there, but that doesn't matter so much as he has no son—only a brace of daughters. Then, of course, there's the show place, Strathlarrig—horrible great house as large as a factory, but wonderful fine salmon-fishin'. Some Americans have got it this year—Boston or Philadelphia, I don't remember which—very rich and said to be rather high-brow. There's a son, I believe."

Lamancha closed the atlas.

"Do you know any of these people, Archie?" he asked.

"Only the Claybody's—very slightly. I stayed with them in Suffolk for a covert shoot two years ago. The Radens have been to call on me, but I was out. The Bandicotts—that's the Americans—are new this year.

"Is the sport good?"

"The very best. Haripol is about the steepest and most sportin' forest in the Highlands, and Glenraden is nearly as good. There's no forest at

Strathlarrig, but, as I've told you, amazin' good salmon fishin'. For a west coast river, I should put the Larrig only second to the Laxford."

Lamancha consulted the atlas again and appeared to ponder. Then he lifted his head, and his long face, which had a certain heaviness and sullenness in repose, was now lit by a smile which made it handsomer and younger.

"Could you have me at Crask this autumn?" he asked. "My wife has to go to Aix for a cure and I have no plans after the House rises."

"I should jolly well think so," cried Archie. "There's heaps of room in the old house, and I promise you I'll make you comfortable. Look here, you fellows! Why shouldn't all three of you come? I can get in a couple of extra maids from Inverlarrig."

"Excellent idea," said Lamancha. "But you mustn't bother about the maids. I'll bring my own man, and we'll have a male establishment, except for Mrs. Lithgow... .By the way, I suppose you can count on Mrs. Lithgow?"

"How do you mean, 'count'?" asked Archie, rather puzzled. Then a difficulty struck him. "But wouldn't you be bored? I can't show you much in the way of sport, and you're not naturalists like me. It's a quiet life, you know."

"I shouldn't be bored," said Lamancha, "I should take steps to prevent it."

Leithen and Palliser-Yeates seemed to divine his intention, for they simultaneously exclaimed.—"It isn't fair to excite Archie, Charles," the latter said. "You know that you'll never do it."

"I intend to have a try. Hang it, John, it's the specific we were talking about—devilish difficult, devilish unpleasant, and calculated to make a man long for a dull life. Of course you two fellows will join me."

"What on earth are you talkin' about?" said the mystified Archie. "Join what?"

"We're proposing to quarter ourselves on you, my lad, and take a leaf out of Jim Tarras's book."

Sir Archie first stared, then he laughed nervously, then he called upon his gods, then he laughed freely and long. "Do you really mean it? What an almighty rag!... But hold on a moment. It will be rather awkward for me to take a hand. You see I've just been adopted as prospective candidate for that part of the country."

"So much the better. If you're found out—which you won't be—you'll get the poaching vote solid, and a good deal more. Most men at heart are poachers."

Archie shook a doubting head. "I don't know about that. They're an awfully respectable lot up there, and all those dashed stalkers and keepers and gillies are a sort of trade-union. The scallywags are a hopeless minority. If I get sent to quod—"

"You won't get sent to quod. At the worst it will be a fine, and you can pay that. What's the extreme penalty for this kind of offence, Ned?"

"I don't know," Leithen answered. "I'm not an authority on Scots law. But Archie's perfectly right. We can't go making a public exhibition of ourselves like this. We're too old to be listening to the chimes at midnight."

"Now, look here." Lamancha had shaken off his glumness and was as tense and eager as a schoolboy. "Didn't your doctor advise you to steal a horse? Well, this is a long sight easier than horse-stealing. It's admitted that we three want a tonic. On second thoughts Archie had better stand out—he hasn't our ailment, and a healthy man doesn't need medicine. But we three need it, and this idea is an inspiration. Of course we take risks, but they're sound sporting risks. After all, I've a reputation of a kind, and I put as much into the pool as anyone."

His hearers regarded him with stony faces, but this in no way checked his ardour.

"It's a perfectly first-class chance. A lonely house where you can see visitors a mile off, and an unsociable dog like Archie for a host. We write the letters and receive the answers at a London address. We arrive at Crask by stealth, and stay there unbeknown to the country- side, for Archie can count on his people and my man in a sepulchre. Also we've got Lithgow, who played the same game with Jim Tarras. We have a job which will want every bit of our nerve and ingenuity with a reasonable spice of danger—for, of course, if we fail we should cut queer figures. The thing is simply ordained by Heaven for our benefit. Of course you'll come."

"I'll do nothing of the kind," said Leithen.

"No more will I," said Palliser-Yeates.

"Then I'll go alone," said Lamancha cheerfully. "I'm out for a cure, if you're not. You've a month to make up your mind, and meanwhile a share in the syndicate remains open to you."

Sir Archie looked as if he wished he had never mentioned the fatal name of Jim Tarras, "I say, you know, Charles," he began hesitatingly, but was cut short.

"Are you going back on your invitation?" asked Lamancha sternly. "Very well, then, I've accepted it, and what's more I'm going to draft a specimen letter that will go to your Highland grandee, and Claybody and the American."

He rose with a bound and fetched a pencil and a sheet of notepaper from the nearest writing-table. "Here goes—Sir, I have the honour to inform you that I propose to kill a stag—or a salmon as the case may be—on your ground between midnight on—and midnight—. We can leave the dates open for the present. The animal, of course, remains your property and will be duly delivered to you. It is a condition that it must be removed wholly outside your bounds. In he event of the undersigned

failing to achieve his purpose he will pay as forfeit one hundred pounds, and if successful fifty pounds to any charity you may appoint. I have the honour to be, your obedient humble servant."

"What do you say to that?" he asked. "Formal, a little official, but perfectly civil, and the writer proposes to pay his way like a gentleman. Bound to make a good impression."

"You've forgotten the signature," Leithen observed dryly.

"It must be signed with a nom de guerre." He thought for a moment. "I've got it. At once business-like and mysterious."

At the bottom of the draft he scrawled the name "John Macnab."

Chapter

2 DESPERATE CHARACTERS IN COUNCIL

Crask—which is properly Craoisg and is so spelled by the Ordnance Survey—when the traveller approaches it from the Larrig Bridge has the air of a West Highland terrier, couchant and regardant. You are to picture a long tilt of moorland running east and west, not a smooth lawn of heather, but seamed with gullies and patched with bogs and thickets and crowned at the summit with a low line of rocks above which may be seen peeping the spikes of the distant Haripol hills. About three-quarters of the way up the slope stands the little house, whitewashed, slated, grey stone framing the narrow windows, with that attractive jumble of masonry which belongs to an adapted farm. It is approached by a road which scorns detours and runs straight from the glen highway, and it looks south over broken moorland to the shining links of the Larrig, and beyond them to the tributary vale of the Raden and the dark mountains of its source. Such is the view from the house itself, but from the garden behind there is an ampler vista, since to the left a glimpse may be had of the policies of Strathlarrig and even of a corner of that monstrous mansion, and to the right of the tidal waters of the river and the yellow sands on which in the stillest weather the Atlantic frets. Crask is at once a sanctuary and a watchtower; it commands a wide countryside and yet preserves its secrecy, for, though officially approached by a road like a ruler, there are a dozen sheltered ways of reaching it by the dips and crannies of the hill-side.

So thought a man who about five o'clock on the afternoon of the 24th of August was inconspicuously drawing towards it by way of a peat road which ran from the east through a wood of birches. Sir Edward Leithen's air was not more cheerful than when we met him a month ago, except that there was now a certain vigour in it which came from ill-temper. He had been for a long walk in the rain, and the scent of wet bracken and birches and bog myrtle, the peaty fragrance of the hills salted with the tang of the sea, had failed to comfort, though, not so long ago, it had had the power to intoxicate. Scrambling in the dell of a burn, he had observed both varieties of the filmy fern and what he knew to be a very rare cerast, and, though an ardent botanist, he had observed them unmoved. Soon the rain had passed, the west wind blew aside the cloud-wrack, and the Haripol tops had come out black against a turquoise sky, with Sgurr Dearg, awful and remote, towering above all. Though a keen mountaineer, the spectacle had neither exhilarated nor tantalised him. He was in a bad temper, and he knew that at Crask he should find three

other men in the same case, for even the debonair Sir Archie was in the dumps with a toothache.

He told himself that he had come on a fool's errand, and the extra absurdity was that he could not quite see how he had been induced to come. He had consistently refused: so had Palliser-Yeates; Archie as a prospective host had been halting and nervous; there was even a time when Lamancha, the source of all the mischief, had seemed to waver. Nevertheless, some occult force—false shame probably—had shepherded them all here, unwilling, unconvinced, cold-footed, destined to a preposterous adventure for which not one of them had the slightest zest... .Yet they had taken immense pains to arrange the thing, just as if they were all exulting in the prospect. His own clerk was to attend to the forwarding of their letters including any which might be addressed to "John Macnab."

The newspapers had contained paragraphs announcing that the Countess of Lamancha had gone to Aix for a month, where she would presently be joined by her husband, who intended to spend a week drinking the waters before proceeding to his grouse-moor of Leriot on the Borders. The Times, three days ago, had recorded Sir Edward Leithen and Mr John Palliser-Yeates as among those who had left Euston for Edinburgh, and more than one social paragrapher had mentioned that the ex-Attorney-General would be spending his holiday fishing on the Tay, while the eminent banker was to the be the guest of the Chancellor of the Exchequer at an informal vacation conference on the nation's precarious finances. Lamancha had been fetched under cover of night by Archie from a station so remote that no one but a lunatic would think of using it. Palliser-Yeates had tramped for two days across the hills from the south, and Leithen himself, having been instructed to bring a Ford car, had had a miserable drive of a hundred and fifty miles in the rain, during which he had repeatedly lost his way. He had carried out his injunctions as to secrecy by arriving at two in the morning by means of this very peat road. The troops had achieved their silent concentration, and the silly business must now begin. Leithen groaned, and anathematised the memory of Jim Tarras.

As he approached the house he saw, to his amazement, a large closed car making its way down the slope. Putting his glass on it, he watched it reach the glen road and then turn east, passing the gates of Strathlarrig, till he lost it behind a shoulder of hill. Hurrying across the stable-yard, he entered the house by the back-door, disturbing Lithgow the Keeper in the midst of a whispered confabulation with Lamancha's man, whose name was Shapp. Passing through the gun-room he found, in the big smoking-room which looked over the valley, Lamancha and Palliser-Yeates with the crouch of conspirators flattening their noses on the windowpane.

The sight of him diverted the attention of the two from the landscape.

"This is an infernal plant," Palliser-Yeates exclaimed. "Archie swore to us that no one ever came here, and the second day a confounded great car arrives. Charles and I had just time to nip in here and lock the door, while Archie parleyed with them. He's been uncommon quick about it. The brutes didn't stay for more than five minutes."

"Who were they?" Leithen asked.

"Only got a side glance at them. They seemed to be a stout woman and a girl—oh, and a yelping little dog. I expect Archie kicked him, for he was giving tongue from the drawing-room."

The door opened to admit their host, who bore in one hand a large whisky-and-soda. He dropped wearily into a chair, where he sipped the beverage. An observer might have noted that what could be seen of his wholesome face was much inflamed, and that a bandage round chin and cheeks which ended in a top-knot above his scalp gave him the appearance of Ricquet with the Tuft in the Fairytale.

"That's all right," he said, in the tone of a man who has done a good piece of work. "I've choked off visitors at Crask for a bit, for the old lady will put it all round the country-side."

"Put what?" said Leithen, and "Who is the old lady?" asked Lamancha, and "Did you kick the dog?" demanded Palliser-Yeates.

Archie looked drearily at his friends. "It was Lady Claybody and a daughter—I think the second one—and their horrid little dog. They won't come back in a hurry—nobody will come back—I'm marked down as a pariah. Hang it, I may as well chuck my candidature. I've scuppered my prospects for the sake of you three asses."

"What has the blessed martyr been and done?" asked Palliser-Yeates.

"I've put a barrage round this place, that's all. I was very civil to the Claybodys, though I felt a pretty fair guy with my head in a sling. I bustled about, talking nonsense and offerin' tea, and then, as luck would have it, I trod on the hound. That's the worst of my game leg. The brute nearly had me over, and it started howlin'—you must have heard it. That dog's a bit weak in the head, for it can't help barkin' just out of pure cussedness—Lady Claybody says it's high-strung because of its fine breedin'. It got something to bark for this time, and the old woman had it in her arms fondlin' it and lookin' very old-fashioned at me. It seems the beast's name is Roguie and she called it her darlin' Wee Roguie, for she's pickin' up a bit of Scots since she came to live in these parts... .Lucky Mackenzie wasn't at home. He'd have eaten it... .Well, after that things settled down, and I was just goin' to order tea, when it occurred to the daughter to ask what was wrong with my face. Then I had an inspiration."

Archie paused and smiled sourly.

"I said I didn't know, but I feared I might be sickenin' for small-pox. I hinted that my face was a horrid sight under the bandage."

"Good for you, Archie," said Lamancha. "What happened then?"

"They bolted—fairly ran for it. They did record time into their car-scarcely stopped to say goodbye. I suppose you realise what I've done, you fellows. The natives here are scared to death of infectious diseases, and if we hadn't our own people we wouldn't have a servant left in the house. The story will be all over the country-side in two days, and my only fear is that it may bring some medical officer of health nosin' round... .Anyhow, it will choke off visitors."

"Archie, you're a brick," was Lamancha's tribute.

"I'm very much afraid I'm a fool, but thank Heaven I'm not the only one. Sime," he shouted in a voice of thunder, "what's happened to tea?"

The shout brought the one-armed butler and Shapp with the apparatus of the meal, and an immense heap of letters all addressed to Sir Archibald Roylance.

"Hullo! the mail has arrived," cried the master of the house. "Now let's see what's the news of John Macnab?"

He hunted furiously among the correspondence, tearing open envelopes and distributing letters to the others with the rapidity of a conjurer. One little sealed packet he reserved to the last, and drew from it three missives bearing the same superscription.

These he opened, glanced at, and handed to Lamancha.

"Read 'em out, Charles," he said. "It's the answers at last."

Lamancha read slowly the first document, of which this is the text:

GLENRADEN CASTLE, STRATHLARRIG, AUG.—19—, SIR, I have received your insolent letter. I do not know what kind of rascal you may be, except that you have the morals of a bandit and the assurance of a halfpenny journalist. But since you seem in your perverted way to be a sportsman, I am not the man to refuse your challenge. My reply is, sir, damn your eyes and have a try. I defy you to kill a stag in my forest between midnight on the 28th of August and midnight of the 30th. I will give instructions to my men to guard my marches, and if you should be roughly handled by them you have only to blame yourself.

Yours faithfully, Alastair Raden. John Macnab, Esq.

"That's a good fellow," said Archie with conviction. "Just the sort of letter I'd write myself. He takes things in the proper spirit. But it's a blue look-out for your chances, my lads. What old Raden doesn't' know about deer isn't knowledge."

Lamancha read the second reply:

STRATHLARRIG HOUSE, STRATHLARRIG, Aug.—, 19—. MY DEAR SIR, Your letter was somewhat of a surprise, but as I am not yet familiar with the customs of this country, I forbear to enlarge on this point, and since you have marked it 'Confidential' I am unable to take advice. You state that you intend to kill a salmon in the Strathlarrig water between midnight on September 1 and midnight on September 3, this salmon, if killed, to remain my property. I have consulted such books as might give me guidance, and I am bound to state that in my view the laws of