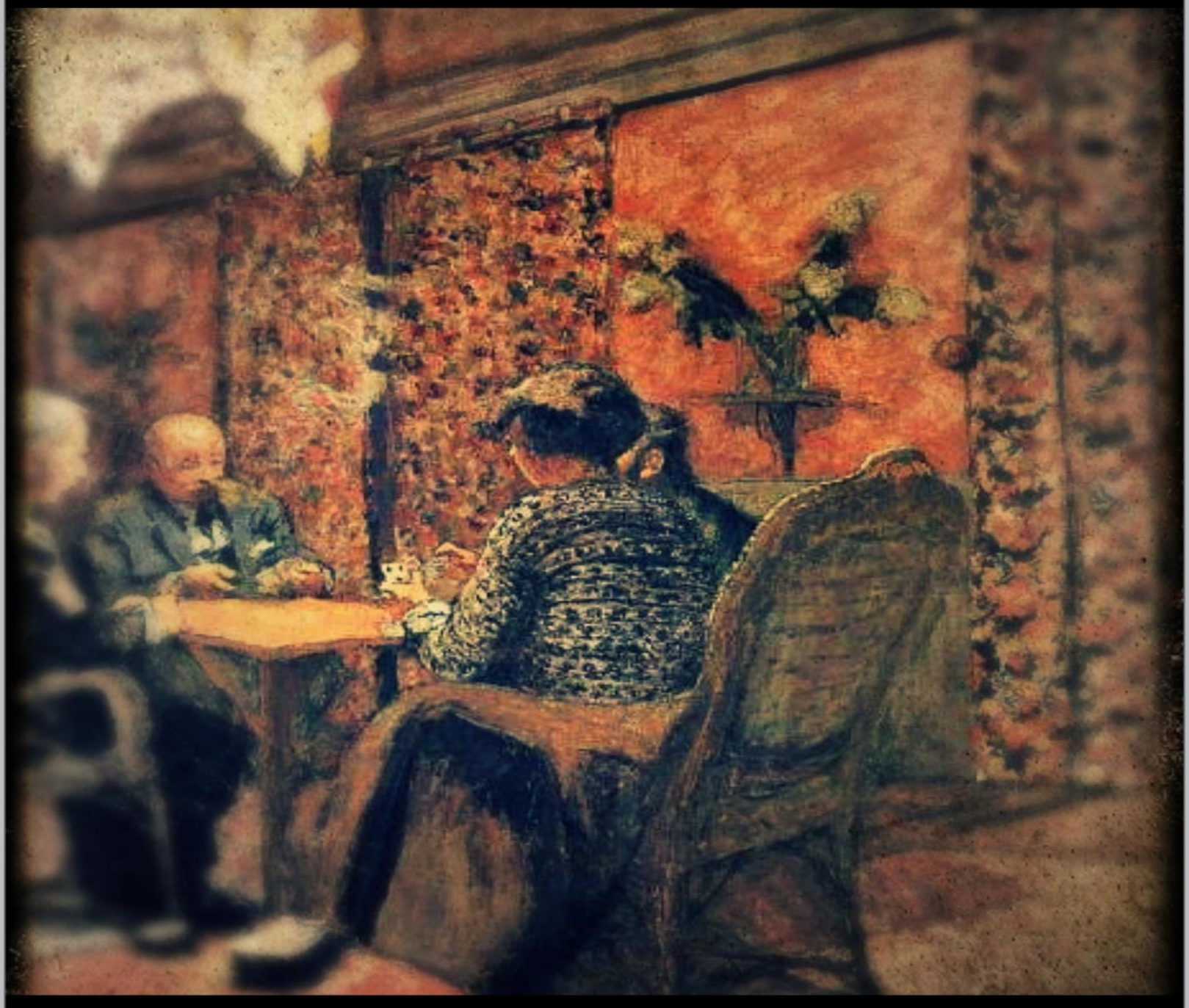
Huntingtower

John Buchan



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PROLOGUE

The girl came into the room with a darting movement like a swallow, looked round her with the same birdlike quickness, and then ran across the polished floor to where a young man sat on a sofa with one leg laid along it.

"I have saved you this dance, Quentin," she said, pronouncing the name with a pretty staccato. "You must be lonely not dancing, so I will sit with you. What shall we talk about?"

The young man did not answer at once, for his gaze was held by her face. He had never dreamed that the gawky and rather plain little girl whom he had romped with long ago in Paris would grow into such a being. The clean delicate lines of her figure, the exquisite pure colouring of hair and skin, the charming young arrogance of the eyes—this was beauty, he reflected, a miracle, a revelation. Her virginal fineness and her dress, which was the tint of pale fire, gave her the air of a creature of ice and flame.

"About yourself, please, Saskia," he said. "Are you happy now that you are a grown-up lady?"

"Happy!" Her voice had a thrill in it like music, frosty music. "The days are far too short. I grudge the hours when I must sleep. They say it is sad for me to make my debut in a time of war. But the world is very kind to me, and after all it is a victorious war for our Russia. And listen to me, Quentin. Tomorrow I am to be allowed to begin nursing at the Alexander Hospital. What do you think of that?"

The time was January 1916, and the place a room in the great Nirski Palace. No hint of war, no breath from the snowy streets, entered that curious chamber where Prince Peter Nirski kept some of the chief of his famous treasures. It was notable for its lack of drapery and upholstering—only a sofa or two and a few fine rugs on the cedar floor.

The walls were of a green marble veined like malachite, the ceiling was of darker marble inlaid with white intaglios. Scattered everywhere were tables and cabinets laden with celadon china, and carved jade, and ivories, and shimmering Persian and Rhodian vessels. In all the room there was scarcely anything of metal and no touch of gilding or bright colour. The light came from green alabaster censers, and the place swam in a cold green radiance like some cavern below the sea. The air was warm and scented, and though it was very quiet there, a hum of voices and the strains of dance music drifted to it from the pillared corridor in which could be seen the glare of lights from the great ballroom beyond.

The young man had a thin face with lines of suffering round the mouth and eyes. The warm room had given him a high colour, which increased his air of fragility. He felt a little choked by the place, which seemed to him for both body and mind a hot-house, though he knew very well that the Nirski Palace on this gala evening was in no way typical of the land or its masters. Only a week ago he had been eating black bread with its owner in a hut on the Volhynian front.

"You have become amazing, Saskia," he said. "I won't pay my old playfellow compliments; besides, you must be tired of them. I wish you happiness all the day long like a fairy-tale Princess. But a crock like me can't do much to help you to it. The service seems to be the wrong way round, for here you are wasting your time talking to me."

She put her hand on his. "Poor Quentin! Is the leg very bad?"

He laughed. "O, no. It's mending famously. I'll be able to get about without a stick in another month, and then you've got to teach me all the new dances."

The jigging music of a two-step floated down the corridor. It made the young man's brow contract, for it brought to him a vision of dead faces in the gloom of a November dusk. He had once had a friend who used to whistle that

air, and he had seen him die in the Hollebeke mud. There was something macabre in the tune... He was surely morbid this evening, for there seemed something macabre about the house, the room, the dancing, all Russia... These last days he had suffered from a sense of calamity impending, of a dark curtain drawing down upon a splendid world. They didn't agree with him at the Embassy, but he could not get rid of the notion.

The girl saw his sudden abstraction.

"What are you thinking about?" she asked. It had been her favourite question as a child.

"I was thinking that I rather wished you were still in Paris."

"But why?"

"Because I think you would be safer."

"Oh, what nonsense, Quentin dear! Where should I be safe if not in my own Russia, where I have friends—oh, so many, and tribes and tribes of relations? It is France and England that are unsafe with the German guns grumbling at their doors... My complaint is that my life is too cosseted and padded. I am too secure, and I do not want to be secure."

The young man lifted a heavy casket from a table at his elbow. It was of dark green imperial jade, with a wonderfully carved lid. He took off the lid and picked up three small oddments of ivory—a priest with a beard, a tiny soldier, and a draught-ox. Putting the three in a triangle, he balanced the jade box on them.

"Look, Saskia! If you were living inside that box you would think it very secure. You would note the thickness of the walls and the hardness of the stone, and you would dream away in a peaceful green dusk. But all the time it would be held up by trifles—brittle trifles."

She shook her head. "You do not understand. You cannot understand. We are a very old and strong people with roots deep, deep in the earth."

"Please God you are right," he said. "But, Saskia, you know that if I can ever serve you, you have only to command me.

Now I can do no more for you than the mouse for the lion—at the beginning of the story. But the story had an end, you remember, and some day it may be in my power to help you. Promise to send for me."

The girl laughed merrily. "The King of Spain's daughter," she quoted,

"Came to visit me, And all for the love Of my little nut-tree."

The other laughed also, as a young man in the uniform of the Preobrajenski Guards approached to claim the girl.

"Even a nut-tree may be a shelter in a storm," he said.

"Of course I promise, Quentin," she said. "Au revoir. Soon I will come and take you to supper, and we will talk of nothing but nut-trees."

He watched the two leave the room, her gown glowing like a tongue of fire in that shadowy archway. Then he slowly rose to his feet, for he thought that for a little he would watch the dancing. Something moved beside him, and he turned in time to prevent the jade casket from crashing to the floor. Two of the supports had slipped.

He replaced the thing on its proper table and stood silent for a moment.

"The priest and the soldier gone, and only the beast of burden left. If I were inclined to be superstitious, I should call that a dashed bad omen."

CHAPTER 1

HOW A RETIRED PROVISION MERCHANT FELT THE IMPULSE OF SPRING

Mr. Dickson McCunn completed the polishing of his smooth cheeks with the towel, glanced appreciatively at their reflection in the looking-glass, and then permitted his eyes to stray out of the window. In the little garden lilacs were budding, and there was a gold line of daffodils beside the tiny greenhouse. Beyond the sooty wall a birch flaunted its new tassels, and the jackdaws were circling about the steeple of the Guthrie Memorial Kirk. A blackbird whistled from a thorn-bush, and Mr. McCunn was inspired to follow its example. He began a tolerable version of "Roy's Wife of Aldivalloch."

He felt singularly light-hearted, and the immediate cause was his safety razor. A week ago he had bought the thing in a sudden fit of enterprise, and now he shaved in five minutes, where before he had taken twenty, and no longer confronted his fellows, at least one day in three, with a countenance ludicrously mottled by sticking-plaster. Calculation revealed to him the fact that in his fifty-five years, having begun to shave at eighteen, he had wasted three thousand three hundred and seventy hours—or one hundred and forty days—or between four and five months—by his neglect of this admirable invention. Now he felt that he had stolen a march on Time. He had fallen heir, thus late, to a fortune in unpurchasable leisure.

He began to dress himself in the sombre clothes in which he had been accustomed for thirty-five years and more to go down to the shop in Mearns Street. And then a thought

came to him which made him discard the grey-striped trousers, sit down on the edge of his bed, and muse. Since Saturday the shop was a thing of the past. On Saturday at half-past eleven, to the accompaniment of a glass of dubious sherry, he had completed the arrangements by which the provision shop in Mearns Street, which had borne so long the legend of D. McCunn, together with the branches in Crossmyloof and the Shaws, became the property of a company, yclept the United Supply Stores, Limited. He had received in payment cash, debentures and preference shares, and his lawyers and his own acumen had acclaimed the bargain. But all the week-end he had been a little sad. It was the end of so old a song, and he knew no other tune to sing. He was comfortably off, healthy, free from any particular cares in life, but free too from any particular duties. "Will I be going to turn into a useless old man?" he asked himself.

But he had woke up this Monday to the sound of the blackbird, and the world, which had seemed rather empty twelve hours before, was now brisk and alluring. His prowess in quick shaving assured him of his youth. "I'm no' that dead old," he observed, as he sat on the edge of he bed, to his reflection in the big looking-glass.

It was not an old face. The sandy hair was a little thin on the top and a little grey at the temples, the figure was perhaps a little too full for youthful elegance, and an athlete would have censured the neck as too fleshy for perfect health. But the cheeks were rosy, the skin clear, and the pale eyes singularly childlike. They were a little weak, those eyes, and had some difficulty in looking for long at the same object, so that Mr. McCunn did not stare people in the face, and had, in consequence, at one time in his career acquired a perfectly undeserved reputation for cunning. He shaved clean, and looked uncommonly like a wise, plump schoolboy. As he gazed at his simulacrum he stopped whistling "Roy's Wife" and let his countenance

harden into a noble sternness. Then he laughed, and observed in the language of his youth that there was "life in the auld dowg yet." In that moment the soul of Mr. McCunn conceived the Great Plan.

The first sign of it was that he swept all his business garments unceremoniously on to the floor. The next that he rootled at the bottom of a deep drawer and extracted a most disreputable tweed suit. It had once been what I believe is called a Lovat mixture, but was now a nondescript subfusc, with bright patches of colour like moss on whinstone. He regarded it lovingly, for it had been for twenty years his holiday wear, emerging annually for a hallowed month to be stained with salt and bleached with sun. He put it on, and stood shrouded in an odour of camphor. A pair of thick nailed boots and a flannel shirt and collar completed the equipment of the sportsman. He had another long look at himself in the glass, and then descended whistling to breakfast. This time the tune was "Macgregors' Gathering," and the sound of it stirred the grimy lips of a man outside who was delivering coals—himself a Macgregor—to follow suit. Mr McCunn was a very fountain of music that morning.

Tibby, the aged maid, had his newspaper and letters waiting by his plate, and a dish of ham and eggs frizzling near the fire. He fell to ravenously but still musingly, and he had reached the stage of scones and jam before he glanced at his correspondence. There was a letter from his wife now holidaying at the Neuk Hydropathic. She reported that her health was improving, and that she had met various people who had known somebody else whom she had once known herself. Mr. McCunn read the dutiful pages and smiled. "Mamma's enjoying herself fine," he observed to the teapot. He knew that for his wife the earthly paradise was a hydropathic, where she put on her afternoon dress and every jewel she possessed when she rose in the morning, ate large meals of which the novelty

atoned for the nastiness, and collected an immense casual acquaintance, with whom she discussed ailments, ministers, sudden deaths, and the intricate genealogies of her class. For his part he rancorously hated hydropathics, having once spent a black week under the roof of one in his wife's company. He detested the food, the Turkish baths (he had a passionate aversion to baring his body before strangers), the inability to find anything to do and the compulsion to endless small talk. A thought flitted over his mind which he was too loyal to formulate. Once he and his wife had had similar likings, but they had taken different roads since their child died. Janet! He saw again—he was never quite free from the sight—the solemn little white-frocked girl who had died long ago in the Spring.

It may have been the thought of the Neuk Hydropathic, or more likely the thin clean scent of the daffodils with which Tibby had decked the table, but long ere breakfast was finished the Great Plan had ceased to be an airy vision and become a sober well-masoned structure. Mr. McCunn—I may confess it at the start—was an incurable romantic. He had had a humdrum life since the day when he had first entered his uncle's shop with the hope of some day succeeding that honest grocer; and his feet had never strayed a yard from his sober rut. But his mind, like the Dying Gladiator's, had been far away. As a boy he had voyaged among books, and they had given him a world where he could shape his career according to his whimsical fancy. Not that Mr. McCunn was what is known as a great reader. He read slowly and fastidiously, and sought in literature for one thing alone. Sir Walter Scott had been his first guide, but he read the novels not for their insight into human character or for their historical pageantry, but because they gave him material wherewith to construct fantastic journeys. It was the same with Dickens. A lit tavern, a stage-coach, post-horses, the clack of hoofs on a frosty road, went to his head like wine. He was a Jacobite

not because he had any views on Divine Right, but because he had always before his eyes a picture of a knot of adventurers in cloaks, new landed from France among the western heather.

On this select basis he had built up his small library—Defoe, Hakluyt, Hazlitt and the essayists, Boswell, some indifferent romances, and a shelf of spirited poetry. His tastes became known, and he acquired a reputation for a scholarly habit. He was president of the Literary Society of the Guthrie Memorial Kirk, and read to its members a variety of papers full of a gusto which rarely became critical. He had been three times chairman at Burns Anniversary dinners, and had delivered orations in eulogy of the national Bard; not because he greatly admired him—he thought him rather vulgar—but because he took Burns as an emblem of the un-Burns-like literature which he loved. Mr. McCunn was no scholar and was sublimely unconscious of background. He grew his flowers in his small garden-plot oblivious of their origin so long as they gave him the colour and scent he sought. Scent, I say, for he appreciated more than the mere picturesque. He had a passion for words and cadences, and would be haunted for weeks by a cunning phrase, savouring it as a connoisseur savours a vintage. Wherefore long ago, when he could ill afford it, he had purchased the Edinburgh Stevenson. They were the only large books on his shelves, for he had a liking for small volumes—things he could stuff into his pocket in that sudden journey which he loved to contemplate.

Only he had never taken it. The shop had tied him up for eleven months in the year, and the twelfth had always found him settled decorously with his wife in some seaside villa. He had not fretted, for he was content with dreams. He was always a little tired, too, when the holidays came, and his wife told him he was growing old. He consoled himself with tags from the more philosophic of his authors, but he scarcely needed consolation. For he had large stores

of modest contentment.
But now something had happened. A spring morning and a safety razor had convinced him that he was still young. Since yesterday he was a man of a large leisure. Providence had done for him what he would never have done for himself. The rut in which he had travelled so long had given place to open country. He repeated to himself one of the quotations with which he had been wont to stir the literary young men at the Guthrie Memorial Kirk:
"What's a man's age? He must hurry more, that's all;
Cram in a day, what his youth took a year to hold:
When we mind labour, then only, we're too old—
What age had Methusalem when he begat Saul?
He would go journeying—who but he?—pleasantly."
It sounds a trivial resolve, but it quickened Mr. McCunn to the depths of his being. A holiday, and alone! On foot, of course, for he must travel light. He would buckle on a pack after the approved fashion. He had the very thing in a drawer upstairs, which he had bought some years ago at a sale. That and a waterproof and a stick, and his outfit was complete. A book, too, and, as he lit his first pipe, he considered what it should be. Poetry, clearly, for it was the Spring, and besides poetry could be got in pleasantly small bulk. He stood before his bookshelves trying to select a volume, rejecting one after another as inapposite. Browning—Keats, Shelley—they seemed more suited for the hearth than for the roadside. He did not want anything Scots, for he was of opinion that Spring came more richly in England and that English people had a better notion of it. He was tempted by the Oxford Anthology, but was deterred by its thickness, for he did not possess the thin-paper edition. Finally he selected Izaak Walton. He had never fished in his life, but The Compleat Angler seemed to fit his mood. It was old and curious and learned and fragrant with the youth of things. He remembered its falling cadences, its country songs and wise meditations.

Decidedly it was the right scrip for his pilgrimage. Characteristically he thought last of where he was to go. Every bit of the world beyond his front door had its charms to the seeing eye. There seemed nothing common or unclean that fresh morning. Even a walk among coal-pits had its attractions. But since he had the right to choose, he lingered over it like an epicure. Not the Highlands, for Spring came late among their sour mosses. Some place where there were fields and woods and inns, somewhere, too, within call of the sea. It must not be too remote, for he had no time to waste on train journeys; nor too near, for he wanted a countryside untainted. Presently he thought of Carrick. A good green land, as he remembered it, with purposeful white roads and public-houses sacred to the memory of Burns; near the hills but yet lowland, and with a bright sea chafing on its shores. He decided on Carrick, found a map, and planned his journey.

Then he routed out his knapsack, packed it with a modest change of raiment, and sent out Tibby to buy chocolate and tobacco and to cash a cheque at the Strathclyde Bank. Till Tibby returned he occupied himself with delicious dreams. He saw himself daily growing browner and leaner, swinging along broad highways or wandering in bypaths. He pictured his seasons of ease, when he unslung his pack and smoked in some clump of lilacs by a burnside—he remembered a phrase of Stevenson's somewhat like that. He would meet and talk with all sorts of folk; an exhilarating prospect, for Mr. McCunn loved his kind. There would be the evening hour before he reached his inn, when, pleasantly tired, he would top some ridge and see the welcoming lights of a little town. There would be the lamp-lit after-supper time when he would read and reflect, and the start in the gay morning, when tobacco tastes sweetest and even fifty-five seems young. It would be holiday of the purest, for no business now tugged at his coat-tails. He was beginning a new life, he told himself,

when he could cultivate the seedling interests which had withered beneath the far-reaching shade of the shop. Was ever a man more fortunate or more free?

Tibby was told that he was going off for a week or two. No letters need be forwarded, for he would be constantly moving, but Mrs. McCunn at the Neuk Hydropathic would be kept informed of his whereabouts. Presently he stood on his doorstep, a stocky figure in ancient tweeds, with a bulging pack slung on his arm, and a stout hazel stick in his hand. A passer-by would have remarked an elderly shopkeeper bent apparently on a day in the country, a common little man on a prosaic errand. But the passer-by would have been wrong, for he could not see into the heart. The plump citizen was the eternal pilgrim; he was Jason, Ulysses, Eric the Red, Albuquerque, Cortez—starting out to discover new worlds.

Before he left Mr. McCunn had given Tibby a letter to post. That morning he had received an epistle from a benevolent acquaintance, one Mackintosh, regarding a group of urchins who called themselves the "Gorbals Die-Hards." Behind the premises in Mearns Street lay a tract of slums, full of mischievous boys, with whom his staff waged truceless war. But lately there had started among them a kind of unauthorised and unofficial Boy Scouts, who, without uniform or badge or any kind of paraphernalia, followed the banner of Sir Robert Baden-Powell and subjected themselves to a rude discipline. They were far too poor to join an orthodox troop, but they faithfully copied what they believed to be the practices of more fortunate boys. Mr. McCunn had witnessed their pathetic parades, and had even passed the time of day with their leader, a red-haired savage called Dougal. The philanthropic Mackintosh had taken an interest in the gang and now desired subscriptions to send them to camp in the country.

Mr. McCunn, in his new exhilaration, felt that he could not

deny to others what he proposed for himself. His last act before leaving was to send Mackintosh ten pounds.

CHAPTER 2

OF MR. JOHN HERITAGE AND THE DIFFERENCE IN POINTS OF VIEW

Dickson McCunn was never to forget the first stage in that pilgrimage. A little after midday he descended from a grimy third-class carriage at a little station whose name I have forgotten. In the village nearby he purchased some new-baked buns and ginger biscuits, to which he was partial, and followed by the shouts of urchins, who admired his pack—"Look at the auld man gaun to the schule"—he emerged into open country. The late April noon gleamed like a frosty morning, but the air, though tonic, was kind. The road ran over sweeps of moorland where curlews wailed, and into lowland pastures dotted with very white, very vocal lambs. The young grass had the warm fragrance of new milk. As he went he munched his buns, for he had resolved to have no plethoric midday meal, and presently he found the burnside nook of his fancy, and halted to smoke. On a patch of turf close to a grey stone bridge he had out his Walton and read the chapter on "The Chavender or Chub." The collocation of words delighted him and inspired him to verse. "Lavender or Lub"—"Pavender or Pub"—"Gravender or Grub"—but the monosyllables proved too vulgar for poetry. Regretfully he desisted.

The rest of the road was as idyllic as the start. He would tramp steadily for a mile or so and then saunter, leaning over bridges to watch the trout in the pools, admiring from a dry-stone dyke the unsteady gambols of new-born lambs, kicking up dust from strips of moor-burn on the heather.

Once by a fir-wood he was privileged to surprise three lunatic hares waltzing. His cheeks glowed with the sun; he moved in an atmosphere of pastoral, serene and contented. When the shadows began to lengthen he arrived at the village of Cloncae, where he proposed to lie. The inn looked dirty, but he found a decent widow, above whose door ran the legend in home-made lettering, "Mrs. Brockie - Tea and Coffee," and who was willing to give him quarters. There he supped handsomely off ham and eggs, and dipped into a work called Covenanting Worthies, which garnished a table decorated with sea-shells. At half-past nine precisely he retired to bed and unhesitating sleep.

Next morning he awoke to a changed world. The sky was grey and so low that his outlook was bounded by a cabbage garden, while a surly wind prophesied rain. It was chilly, too, and he had his breakfast beside the kitchen fire. Mrs. Brockie could not spare a capital letter for her surname on the signboard, but she exalted it in her talk. He heard of a multitude of Brockies, ascendant, descendant, and collateral, who seemed to be in a fair way to inherit the earth. Dickson listened sympathetically, and lingered by the fire. He felt stiff from yesterday's exercise, and the edge was off his spirit.

The start was not quite what he had pictured. His pack seemed heavier, his boots tighter, and his pipe drew badly. The first miles were all uphill, with a wind tingling his ears, and no colours in the landscape but brown and grey. Suddenly he awoke to the fact that he was dismal, and thrust the notion behind him. He expanded his chest and drew in long draughts of air. He told himself that this sharp weather was better than sunshine. He remembered that all travellers in romances battled with mist and rain. Presently his body recovered comfort and vigour, and his mind worked itself into cheerfulness.

He overtook a party of tramps and fell into talk with them. He had always had a fancy for the class, though he had

never known anything nearer it than city beggars. He pictured them as philosophic vagabonds, full of quaint turns of speech, unconscious Borrovians. With these samples his disillusionment was speedy. The party was made up of a ferret-faced man with a red nose, a draggle-tailed woman, and a child in a crazy perambulator. Their conversation was one-sided, for it immediately resolved itself into a whining chronicle of misfortunes and petitions for relief. It cost him half a crown to be rid of them.

The road was alive with tramps that day. The next one did the accosting. Hailing Mr. McCunn as "Guv'nor," he asked to be told the way to Manchester. The objective seemed so enterprising that Dickson was impelled to ask questions, and heard, in what appeared to be in the accents of the Colonies, the tale of a career of unvarying calamity. There was nothing merry or philosophic about this adventurer. Nay, there was something menacing. He eyed his companion's waterproof covetously, and declared that he had had one like it which had been stolen from him the day before. Had the place been lonely he might have contemplated highway robbery, but they were at the entrance to a village, and the sight of a public-house awoke his thirst. Dickson parted with him at the cost of sixpence for a drink.

He had no more company that morning except an aged stone-breaker whom he convoyed for half a mile. The stone-breaker also was soured with the world. He walked with a limp, which, he said, was due to an accident years before, when he had been run into by "ane of thae damned velocipeeds." The word revived in Dickson memories of his youth, and he was prepared to be friendly. But the ancient would have none of it. He inquired morosely what he was after, and, on being told remarked that he might have learned more sense. "It's a daft-like thing for an auld man like you to be traivellin' the roads. Ye maun be ill-off for a job." Questioned as to himself, he became, as the

newspapers say, "reticent," and having reached his bing of stones, turned rudely to his duties. "Awa' hame wi' ye," were his parting words. "It's idle scoondrels like you that maks wark for honest folk like me."

The morning was not a success, but the strong air had given Dickson such an appetite that he resolved to break his rule, and, on reaching the little town of Kilchrist, he sought luncheon at the chief hotel. There he found that which revived his spirits. A solitary bagman shared the meal, who revealed the fact that he was in the grocery line. There followed a well-informed and most technical conversation. He was drawn to speak of the United Supply Stores, Limited, of their prospects and of their predecessor, Mr. McCunn, whom he knew well by repute but had never met. "Yon's the clever one." he observed. "I've always said there's no longer head in the city of Glasgow than McCunn. An old-fashioned firm, but it has aye managed to keep up with the times. He's just retired, they tell me, and in my opinion it's a big loss to the provision trade... " Dickson's heart glowed within him. Here was Romance; to be praised incognito; to enter a casual inn and find that fame had preceded him. He warmed to the bagman, insisted on giving him a liqueur and a cigar, and finally revealed himself. "I'm Dickson McCunn," he said, "taking a bit holiday. If there's anything I can do for you when I get back, just let me know." With mutual esteem they parted.

He had need of all his good spirits, for he emerged into an unrelenting drizzle. The environs of Kilchrist are at the best unlovely, and in the wet they were as melancholy as a graveyard. But the encounter with the bagman had worked wonders with Dickson, and he strode lustily into the weather, his waterproof collar buttoned round his chin. The road climbed to a bare moor, where lagoons had formed in the ruts, and the mist showed on each side only a yard or two of soaking heather. Soon he was wet; presently every part of him—boots, body, and pack—was one vast sponge.

The waterproof was not water-proof, and the rain penetrated to his most intimate garments. Little he cared. He felt lighter, younger, than on the idyllic previous day. He enjoyed the buffets of the storm, and one wet mile succeeded another to the accompaniment of Dickson's shouts and laughter. There was no one abroad that afternoon, so he could talk aloud to himself and repeat his favourite poems. About five in the evening there presented himself at the Black Bull Inn at Kirkmichael a soaked, disreputable, but most cheerful traveller.

Now the Black Bull at Kirkmichael is one of the few very good inns left in the world. It is an old place and an hospitable, for it has been for generations a haunt of anglers, who above all other men understand comfort. There are always bright fires there, and hot water, and old soft leather armchairs, and an aroma of good food and good tobacco, and giant trout in glass cases, and pictures of Captain Barclay of Urie walking to London and Mr. Ramsay of Barnton winning a horse-race, and the three-volume edition of the Waverley Novels with many volumes missing, and indeed all those things which an inn should have. Also there used to be—there may still be—sound vintage claret in the cellars. The Black Bull expects its guests to arrive in every stage of dishevelment, and Dickson was received by a cordial landlord, who offered dry garments as a matter of course. The pack proved to have resisted the elements, and a suit of clothes and slippers were provided by the house. Dickson, after a glass of toddy, wallowed in a hot bath, which washed all the stiffness out of him. He had a fire in his bedroom, beside which he wrote the opening passages of that diary he had vowed to keep, descanting lyrically upon the joys of ill weather. At seven o'clock, warm and satisfied in soul, and with his body clad in raiment several sizes too large for it, he descended to dinner.

At one end of the long table in the dining-room sat a group of anglers. They looked jovial fellows, and Dickson would

fain have joined them; but, having been fishing all day in the Lock o' the Threshes, they were talking their own talk, and he feared that his admiration for Izaak Walton did not qualify him to butt into the erudite discussions of fishermen. The landlord seemed to think likewise, for he drew back a chair for him at the other end, where sat a young man absorbed in a book. Dickson gave him good evening, and got an abstracted reply. The young man supped the Black Bull's excellent broth with one hand, and with the other turned the pages of his volume. A glance convinced Dickson that the work was French, a literature which did not interest him. He knew little of the tongue and suspected it of impropriety.

Another guest entered and took the chair opposite the bookish young man. He was also young—not more than thirty-three—and to Dickson's eye was the kind of person he would have liked to resemble. He was tall and free from any superfluous flesh; his face was lean, fine-drawn, and deeply sunburnt, so that the hair above showed oddly pale; the hands were brown and beautifully shaped, but the forearm revealed by the loose cuffs of his shirt was as brawny as a blacksmith's. He had rather pale blue eyes, which seemed to have looked much at the sun, and a small moustache the colour of ripe hay. His voice was low and pleasant, and he pronounced his words precisely, like a foreigner.

He was very ready to talk, but in defiance of Dr. Johnson's warning, his talk was all questions. He wanted to know everything about the neighbourhood—who lived in what houses, what were the distances between the towns, what harbours would admit what class of vessel. Smiling agreeably, he put Dickson through a catechism to which he knew none of the answers. The landlord was called in, and proved more helpful. But on one matter he was fairly at a loss. The catechist asked about a house called Darkwater, and was met with a shake of the head. "I know no sic-like

name in this countryside, sir," and the catechist looked disappointed.
The literary young man said nothing, but ate trout abstractedly, one eye on his book. The fish had been caught by the anglers in the Loch o' the Threshes, and phrases describing their capture floated from the other end of the table. The young man had a second helping, and then refused the excellent hill mutton that followed, contenting himself with cheese. Not so Dickson and the catechist. They ate everything that was set before them, topping up with a glass of port. Then the latter, who had been talking illuminatingly about Spain, rose, bowed, and left the table, leaving Dickson, who liked to linger over his meals, to the society of the ichthyophagous student.
He nodded towards the book. "Interesting?" he asked.
The young man shook his head and displayed the name on the cover. "Anatole France. I used to be crazy about him, but now he seems rather a back number." Then he glanced towards the just-vacated chair. "Australian," he said.
"How d'you know?"
"Can't mistake them. There's nothing else so lean and fine produced on the globe to-day. I was next door to them at Pozieres and saw them fight. Lord! Such men! Now and then you had a freak, but most looked like Phoebus Apollo."
Dickson gazed with a new respect at his neighbour, for he had not associated him with battle-fields. During the war he had been a fervent patriot, but, though he had never heard a shot himself, so many of his friends' sons and nephews, not to mention cousins of his own, had seen service, that he had come to regard the experience as commonplace. Lions in Africa and bandits in Mexico seemed to him novel and romantic things, but not trenches and airplanes which were the whole world's property. But he could scarcely fit his neighbour into even his haziest picture of war. The young man was tall and a little round-shouldered; he had short-sighted, rather prominent brown eyes, untidy black hair

and dark eyebrows which came near to meeting. He wore a knickerbocker suit of bluish-grey tweed, a pale blue shirt, a pale blue collar, and a dark blue tie—a symphony of colour which seemed too elaborately considered to be quite natural. Dickson had set him down as an artist or a newspaper correspondent, objects to him of lively interest. But now the classification must be reconsidered.

"So you were in the war," he said encouragingly.

"Four blasted years," was the savage reply. "And I never want to hear the name of the beastly thing again."

"You said he was an Australian," said Dickson, casting back. "But I thought Australians had a queer accent, like the English."

"They've all kind of accents, but you can never mistake their voice. It's got the sun in it. Canadians have got grinding ice in theirs, and Virginians have got butter. So have the Irish. In Britain there are no voices, only speaking-tubes. It isn't safe to judge men by their accent only. You yourself I take to be Scotch, but for all I know you may be a senator from Chicago or a Boer General."

"I'm from Glasgow. My name's Dickson McCunn." He had a faint hope that the announcement might affect the other as it had affected the bagman at Kilchrist.

"Golly, what a name!" exclaimed the young man rudely.

Dickson was nettled. "It's very old Highland," he said. "It means the son of a dog."

"Which—Christian name or surname?" Then the young man appeared to think he had gone too far, for he smiled pleasantly. "And a very good name too. Mine is prosaic by comparison. They call me John Heritage."

"That," said Dickson, mollified, "is like a name out of a book. With that name by rights you should be a poet."

Gloom settled on the young man's countenance. "It's a dashed sight too poetic. It's like Edwin Arnold and Alfred Austin and Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Great poets have vulgar monosyllables for names, like Keats. The new Shakespeare