

## The Thirty-nine Steps

*J. Buchan*

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I recall the title from the series 'Easy Readers' in which classical books were simplified for beginning English students. I read a few of those I guess at the age of thirteen or so, but I do not recall whether I read this particular one, and if so it must all have been obliterated in my memory.

Buchan referred to it as a 'shocker', meaning that an ordinary sane reader would continually being shocked by the way the plot twists and turns always beyond the probable and always just within the possible. This was the first in a series of shockers which would feature Richard Hannay as the central character as well as narrator. Two others in that series have already been read and reviewed<sup>1</sup> but although done fairly recently they are already blurred in my memory. The 'shockers' belongs to a genre which R.L. Stevenson may have pioneered, and in what sense do the shockers of Buchan differ from 'Kidnapped' and 'Treasure Island'? The obvious answer is that they cater to adults who has failed to outgrow and go beyond the literary taste of the reading child. 'Treasure Island' made a very deep impression on me as a child, along with Robinson Crusoe it was my favorite book and I read it over and over again, and even as an adult I have read it in its original English and even recently in a French rendering. Kidnapped (also recently reviewed) I read as an adult and it failed to move me, maybe as 'Treasure Island' would fail to move me had I not encountered it as a child. The child is receptive and not yet jaded, it bestows the most mundane with an expansive imagination, much more willing than the adult to postpone judgment and allow a book to invade its mind. As to Treasure Island, what excited me was not the suspense, in fact I first came across it in a comics version when I was seven, but the very atmosphere it created and that it was set in the 18th century which had already taken on a magical aura. But ultimately the fascination with the book could be due to the fascination with John Silver which is presented as an ambiguous character both good and evil and this mixture is bound to engage a child morphing into a youth.

When it comes to any of those Hannay novels, you read them for the suspense, even if that is a fairly thin attraction, and not for the depth and complexity of characters, who too often resemble cardboard cut-outs. The author himself may have been embarrassed by the books and even by their success whose financial rewards, however, must have been sweet enough to render the embarrassment moot. We are confronted with the proverbial upper stiff lips of imperial Englishmen out for excitement, be it in the velds of South Africa or the more homely attractions of the moors of Scotland. The latter present wilderness easily accessible from the south of England as well as domesticated with no vast distances, nor any truly wild and dangerous animals and romantically steeped in Scottish culture. You walk along moors, transverse ridges, fish in brooks, and sleep under a pine or in a cottage which never is too far away. Buchan is of Scottish descent and Scotland always place an

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<sup>1</sup> Book Reviews XVII

important role in his shockers, at least those concerning Hannay.

The book starts well enough with Hannay being bored to tears with his quiet life in London. A visit by a stranger who claims to be dead (having actually faked his own death by having got his hands on a cadaver through contacts wisely not disclosed to the reader) and has a strange tale to tell involving international politics and conspiracies. The stranger is given a sanctuary in Hannays home and is one day discovered dead a dagger pinning him to the floor by route of his heart. And now the story starts with its chain of more or less contrived turns of the plot and we have left serious literature behind and thus been invited to some wholesome escapism. Such things work well in a televised series, many of which are adaptations of older stories, but actually less on the printed page which demands more of you in terms of a constructive imagination. What may grip you on the screen may seem silly on the page.

It would be tedious to provide a brief of the plot but it hinges on Hannay's resourcefulness, easy to display in a fictional character, more precisely his ability to disguise himself. Here the author, through the mouthpiece of his narrator, explains that a successful disguise is not just about a change of facial appearance, but more of a total transformation in which you act consistently a part, not only when you imagine you are being observed. In fact, as we all have observed, recognizing someone outside his or her usual context is very difficult, the lady that serves on you at your favorite coffee house, may startle you as being vaguely familiar in the underground.

There is a dramatic ending, not badly constructed, which may account for it being the best-known of all Buchan's novels. It is comparatively short which may have endeared it to graphic adaptation, Hitchcock's version, taking great liberties, being still the most famous one, scenes of which appear in other Hitchcock productions. It may have been the inspiration for scenes in other classical Hitchcock movies, such as in 'North by Northwest' when Cary Grant is chased by an airplane in an open field in the Mid-West.

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