

The Three Hostages

J.Buchan

March 10-23, 2020

The books by Buchan seem to combine a certain intellectual sophistication and rather competent not to say engaging nature descriptions (in this book Scottish mountain scenery) with the most inane of plots. The tones of the books are adult and mature, but the plots are contrived and childish. He was a popular writer, and if you suspend judgment, you may enjoy the element of tension and suspense, in short read them as thrillers. Thus it is not surprising that they have been successfully adapted to the film, where the literary weaknesses are not apparent, and through which the thriller aspect is given credibility. In this respects I would say that the present book is representative.

Our fictional friend Sir Richard Hannay wants to retire to his beloved manor Fosse in the idyllic Cotswold in order to peacefully farm. But none of that as he is approached by some prominent people who plead with him to find and release three hostages held by a crime syndicate which Scotland Yard is about to round up, but due to the hostages that cannot be done without a prior more or less simultaneous liberation of them. But how to find them? The only clue is to be found in some doggerel verse that our protagonist comes across as having been brought to the attention to the parents of the hostages, proving that three seemingly disparate cases are connected.

*On the other side of Jordan
In the Green fields of Eden
Where the Tree of Life is blooming
There is rest for you.*

The three hostages are all children of rich and powerful men. One is a young woman, another a young college-age man and finally a young boy. Hannay is reluctant to forfeit his idyllic life on the farm, he has had enough of strenuous adventures in his day, but the case of the young boy, which makes both him and his wife Mary think of their own little boy Peter John, clinches the matter. Hannay is on, but there is not much time to play with.

It would be tedious to make a summary of the plot, but its main component is the presence of a certain Dominick Medina, who seems to charm everyone out of their wits, and Hannay is himself taken by him. Medina is urbane, clever, friendly, extremely interesting, moving in the best of circles, valued member of the Clubs which count and considering a political career, for which he seems singularly adapted. In short Medina would be the perfect companion and he feels it would be a privilege to win his friendship and become his confidante. He does, however, hold back, and lucky for him. As it turns out Medina is at the head of the syndicate. After a dinner¹ at the Thursday Club he is invited to

¹ at which Hannay's friend Sandy is also present, Medina refuses to drink wine and explains it by a reference to an obscure Latin citation, which puts Sandy, who always plays important roles in those thrillers, on the trail.

walk him home, and is of course invited to stay for a smoke. This takes place in Medina's huge library (which may intimidate Hannay a bit, as he is not exactly an intellectual, only a successful soldier serving with merit as a general during the War) and where he falls asleep and wakes up during an attempt at being hypnotized by his host but manages to hold himself aloof priding himself on his inability, unlike ordinary mortals, to be easily influenced. There ensues a battle of will and wits, in which Hannay manages successfully to keep the illusion alive in Medina, an illusion to the effect of Hannay being under his power and serving as his slave.

Hardly surprisingly the hostages are found and released, except that the young boy which is now dressed up as a girl with all of his memories erased and needs to be awakened from his hypnotized states which can only be effected by Medina himself. The latter has no reason to do so, unless he be forcefully prodded which is done by Mary brandishing a hot poker threatening to disfigure him for life. This episode belongs to the weakest in the book, and that says a lot. But of course on the screen it may work nicely.

To make a rather long and winded story short. When one thinks that the book finally is over with a happy ending to boot, some thirty pages remain. The reason is that Medina is still at large, and as it turns out bent on killing Hannay, as having wounded his vanity irreparably. The conclusion of the book is a rather incredible game of hide and seek set in the mountains of a stage-stalking reserve, in which Medina tries to shoot and kill our hero and almost succeeds shattering the fingers of the latter by a shot. At the end they have both lost their rifles and the hunt is now focused on them both climbing some steep chimneys, but Medina takes the wrong fork and lands himself in serious trouble. Hannay, gentleman as he is all the way to his finger tips, tries to save him, but having had, as noted, his hand just shot to pieces by Medina, cannot manage it, the ropes slips over a sharp edge and snaps and Medina falls to his death². Double satisfaction, having your hated dangerous enemy eliminated without having the responsibility of killing him to boot. Those final pages of the book, meant to keep you on your hooks, appear preposterous in a summary, embarrassing in a book, but no doubt highly successful on the screen.

But the book has its merits, once one neglects the silliness of the plot and some of the scenes. It was written in 1924 and gives some feeling of the time and above all the moral modes that underlie the narrative. All the people who count in the novel are of course prominent people, and often but not always (Jews are exceptions) nobility. What is valued, as in Icelandic Sagas, are fortitude and stiff upper lips, and then of course the idea of a gentleman and fair play plays a fair rôle. The Germans and the English have a lot in common, much more than they (especially the English) would be prepared to admit. Ernst Jünger was a German author whose celebration of war and courage has sent a distasteful chill down the spines of modern readers and has been censored as a Nazi, or at least as a proto-one, but he would nevertheless fit beautifully in this British tradition, maybe too well. The problem with him is that he is a bit too explicit, about his view, while his British equivalents may be a bit more reticent.

Now if Buchan would work on a more realistic and believable plot, he may do something at least thrilling, if not of lasting value. Maybe his most famous work 'The Thirty

² As Moriarty in his struggle with Sherlock Holmes falls into a waterfall. Actually Sherlock Holmes falls as well, but Conan Doyle was forced to resurrect him by a pleading reading public.

nine Steps' would fill that bill. Anyway, it is clear that he had no higher ambitions for his work than to entertain (and make money). As with Cicero and his briefs addressing a jury: They were meant to dazzle for the moment not to survive a night of sober reflections.

March 24, 2020 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se